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BEFORE HE COULD FINISH HIS ODIOUS SPEECH, MR. WOOD STRUCK OUT AND PULLED HIM TO THE GROUND.

MARMION WOOD'S CLERK.

[A NOVELETTE.]

CHAPTER I.

After papa's death we found ourselves so much reduced in circumstances that it became necessary for us to add in some way to our tiny income.

We had many friends, and each gave his or her advice gratuitously, and we listened with becoming gravity, but in our hearts Hildred and I had determined what to do.

The house must be sold, the house to which mamma had been brought a happy bride, but we could retain enough furniture to make a new home comfortable; and Hildred suggested we should move to Maxworth, a large manufacturing town twenty miles distant, where we should be sure to find employment.

Good Doctor Smith approved this plan, and set to work to help us, and to persuade mamma nothing could be better.

It was he who managed all the following troublesome business, who secured the post of organist at St. Phillip's, Maxworth, for Hildred, together with some pupils; he who engaged a house for us on the outskirts of the town, where we should be less annoyed by the dust and noise of the factories.

The house was small, but pretty enough, with a bay window, an infinitesimal scrap of garden in front, a narrow strip behind; and when Hildred and I had arranged the furniture and draped the windows to our satisfaction we sat down contentedly enough.

"We might take a lodger," said mamma, presently, "I should feel I was helping them."

Hildred grimaced horribly at this.

"Oh, mamma! can't we manage without that? and Belle is sure to get something to do soon."

"If you work why should not I? We must not be proud, Hildred."

So a card disfigured our pretty window, and mamma waited patiently for the lodger to come. Then I obtained a situation as corresponding clerk to Mr. Marmion Wood, one of the greatest men in Maxworth; and we all talked as if a fortune was in our very grasp.

I remember, too, how heartily we laughed over my employer's romantic name, and tried to imagine what manner of man he was, for my engagement had been made by letter, Doctor Smith acting as my referee. Mamma decided Mr. Wood should be dark, tall, cynical; Hildred protested I should discover him to be short, round, fussy and vulgar.

It was with considerable doubt and dread I entered my neat little office the following morning. A sandy haired young man escorted me there, informing me on the way that the lady clerk had quite a "parlour" to herself, "whilst the men, poor beggars, have to be content with what they can get."

There was no one to receive me, but when I had fidgeted about the apartment for some ten minutes, I heard quick steps outside, then the door was pushed open impatiently, and a tall, spare man of some thirty years entered. He was hardly what one could call handsome, but the keen, clearly cut face was not unpleasant, the grey eyes not unkindly.

"I beg your pardon, Miss Stretton," he said with a quick, critical glance. "I ought to have been here earlier, but I got detained in the street. Folks have no consideration for business men. Now, if you will remove your hat and jacket we will get to work; there is a great batch of letters to answer."

He sat down by me, and gave me a few rapid instructions, then saying—

"You are new to your work, but your calligraphy is good, and I've no doubt we shall suit each other well enough."

He disappeared then, and I did not see him again until the time for closing arrived. Then he came in, bringing a lad of some seventeen years with him.

"My half-brother, Walter, Miss Stretton," he said in his rapid way. "Now, let me see what you have done. Ah! very well! very well, indeed! I suppose you are tired by this, and thankful enough six o'clock is here. I will close the office, and send Dodson down to you with the key, as I shall be out to-morrow."

So I wished him "Good evening!" and came away, very well satisfied with myself and my employer.

He was abrupt in manner, but not unkindly, and had the appearance of gentle birth.

"Well!" cried Hildred, as she met me at the door, "who described the hero correctly, mamma or I?"

"Neither," I said, laughing; "the Marmion in question is tall, thin, rather fair, and a shrewd, cool business man; confess you're a little disappointed, Hildred."

"Not I! I am agreeably surprised. I thought he would be one remove only from an ogre. But make haste down, there are muffins for tea," and she went back to mamma, whilst I ran away to remove the dust and stains of the day.

The next day Mr. Wood did not appear, but Walter sauntered into my office, and seating himself upon the table, began to talk garrulously, staring at me so markedly the whole while that I was quite embarrassed, and a little angry, too.

"I hope you don't mind me coming here," he said; "there's nothing to do up at the house, and my vacation isn't up until next week. I wanted to go with Marmion to town, but he wouldn't hear of it; he treats me just like a child," with a toss of his curly head; "yet I'm as old as you, I'll wager; I'm seventeen."

"Oh!" I say, with an air of superiority; "I'm a great deal older than that: I was eighteen last March."

"That makes only a year's difference between us. I'm not annoying you, am I?"

"Oh, no! but my work isn't progressing very fast."

"All right! I'm going presently, because Marmion is awfully down on indolence, and I should be sorry to get you arowing; he wouldn't spare me, either."

The handsome, weak, young face flushed, and the eyes flashed.

"He is most unjust to me. Why, he actually intends to keep me another year at Doctor Floyd's; says I'm not to be trusted by myself; that he is very much afraid Oxford will be the ruin of me. He doesn't remember the great difference in our ages; why he is thirty, and old for his age."

I hardly knew how to answer this petulant cutabout; and, indeed, Walter Wood did not seem to expect or wish for any response, for he went on, with very little pause:

"Marmion doesn't make any allowance for me; in fact, I believe he is jealous of me"—(here I nearly laughed; the boy's conceit was so sublime). "You see his mother was only a poor shop girl, whilst mine was a lady of rank; she would never have married my father but for his money."

"I should not repeat that statement if I were you," I said, dryly.

"Why not? I'm proud of my relations on my mother's side. I wish my father had left me to their guardianship instead of Marmion's. Why, I verily believe he would make me work in the factory if he could."

"There would be small disgrace in that."

"I beg your pardon! There might not be for Marmion, but there would be for me—the Lady Helena Drinsworth's son," and with an air of dignity, he slipped from the table and went out, only to reappear later on.

"It's quite a comfort to talk to you; you seem to understand me so well," he said, after monopolising the conversation some twenty minutes. "There is so much in birth, and I heard Marmion say you were a lady born. Don't you hate this work?"

"No, I rather like it; isn't my taste awfully depraved? And I would rather earn my bread than beg it."

He looked curiously at me, then remarked irrelevantly.

"Miss Stretton, do you know how very pretty you are?"

I laughed in an embarrassed fashion, and said, awkwardly:

"You would not think so, if you saw my sister Hildred."

"Do you mean that tall, handsome girl, with the black eyes, I've seen with you?"

"Yes!"

"She's a regular stunner, but I like you best; I don't care for tall women; now you—"

"Master Walter!" I broke in, "will you please go; I cannot work and talk, and I'm sure Mr. Wood would not like you to spend so much time here."

And after a great deal of difficulty I rid myself of this foolish boy; but in the few following days he haunted the little office, and I think this was known to Marmion Wood: however that may be, one morning he entered quickly, and after a keen glance at my flushed, disturbed face, turned to Walter.

"Will you understand Miss Stretton's time is not her own?" he said, in his low, rapid way: "and, Miss Stretton, please remember my brother has no right here!"

Walter sneaked off, leaving me to bear the brunt of Mr. Wood's anger and suspicion. I was terribly mortified, and I believed I hated my employer honestly then. How dare he suppose I should stoop to inveigle that silly boy into my office, or use him as a stepping stone to wealth! I wrote on in silence for some time, scarcely conscious of what I was doing, and aware that Marmion Wood was calmly scrutinising me the whole while. At last I could bear his regard and my own mortification no longer, and flinging down my pen, said passionately—

"Mr. Wood, you are not to suppose I am to blame in this matter; it was entirely against my wish that your brother spent so much time in this office!"

"Go on," he said, coolly, as I paused, a little scared by my own temerity; and there was something like a smile in his grey eyes.

"You will make him understand that I have found his society irksome, and his mean conduct of this morning was hardly worthy the son of the Lady Helena Drinsworth!"

To my surprise and indignation he burst into a loud and hearty laugh at my savage thrust.

"So the little fool has given you his pedigree already," he said, when he could speak. "Well, Miss Stretton, I will repeat your words to him, but (mischieffully) I'm afraid you will make an enemy of Walter. He never forgives an affront; and without a word of apology to me, he dipped into his correspondence.

All that day I stood upon my dignity, answering all my employer's questions in a frigid voice, and as shortly as civility would permit. It angered me beyond words, now and again, to catch the amused gleam in his eyes, to hear the suppressed laughter in his voice. I was glad when the day ended, and locking my desk, I began to dress hastily. Marmion Wood walked to the door,

then came back again, and confronting me, said,—

"Do you know, Miss Stretton, you are behaving very like a child!"

"I know I have been grossly insulted in thought, if not word!" I retorted, angrily.

"How was I to know (on so short an acquaintance) that you were different to other girls?" he answered, coolly. "Walter is so weak that a woman of moderately strong will could sway him as she would; and, unfortunately for him, he will be a rich man—unless he goes to the Jews before his majority. It's quite likely he will—the weak, vicious lad!"

"He is your brother," I remarked, dryly.

"For that I should be pained; it is my misfortune," coolly. "I dare say you think I am awfully hard on the boy; most folks do, because he can be very winning when he chooses; I only wish his champion stood in my place. But really, Miss Stretton, you must not go away in such hot anger, or I shall find the office empty to-morrow. If I confess I was in the wrong—"

"I am willing to confess that I was very angry," I said, beginning to laugh, and so we shook hands and parted friends, at least for a time.

Hildred met me in the tiny hall.

"Belle," she whispered, "the lodger has come—and is young, handsome, and quite distinguished."

CHAPTER II.

MR. RICHARD EDMOND proved quite an acquisition to the family circle. To my intense relief he did not rob us of our pretty parlour; he preferred to board with us, and engaged only a bedroom, saying, laughingly, he was too poor to afford any luxuries.

He had come to Maxworth to act as third master in Dr. Floyd's academy, but no one knew anything of his antecedents. The doctor had ascertained that he had graduated at Cambridge, taking an excellent degree, and this was all that was known of him.

The wildest guesses were made concerning him. He was such a handsome young fellow, so aristocratic in speech and bearing that I think no one believed him to be quite what he represented himself.

However that might be, he contributed largely to the pleasure of our quiet evenings; and very soon mamma and I began to notice his attentions to our handsome Hildred.

They sang together, or he turned the leaves whilst she played. If we indulged in a game of what he always contrived to be her partner, and his tastes were in all things identical with hers.

I watched the two with interest, but mamma grew anxious and wished Dick had never come to live with us, "because, my dear Belle, we know nothing of his family, and he may be already a married man," she said.

I laughed out heartily.

"I do not think, mamma, there is any need for fear," I said. "I am quite sure Mr. Edmund is as honest as a man can well be; and I only hope he and Hildred may be very happy."

That same night when I left the office I heard rapid steps behind me, and although I walked quickly they gained on me each moment.

I felt very nervous, guessing only too well who was my pursuer. For many days I had been annoyed by the impertinent attentions of a much be-ringed and perfumed individual, by courtesy styled a gentleman. But I had said nothing to mamma or Hildred, hoping that my frigid behaviour would nip his insolence in the bud.

I was unfortunately mistaken, and I started with an indignant cry when a hand was laid familiarly on my arm and a hateful, smooth voice said,—

"Why do you always run away from me, pretty one? I am going your way, let us walk together!"

"How dare you!" I demanded. "How dare you so insult me!"

"And can the pretty status speak!" said my persecutor, with an odious leer. "I began to think you voiceless. As for insulting you,

nothing is farther from my thoughts, Miss Stretton."

"I was startled when he spoke my name, and I think I showed this plainly, for he laughed lightly, and said,—

"You see I know all about you, your name, occupation, and address, and to-night I intend escorting you home."

"I will appeal to the first passer-by!" I cried, beside myself with fear and anger. "I will not give a step beside you!"

"You are very foolish, and are sure to create a scene and a scandal! if you do as you threaten. Come, sweetheart, you have surely held out long enough to satisfy your girlish scruples. You know, really, you are not angry with me for admiring and—loving you."

I stood quite still, dazed a moment by his impudent insolence, and taking advantage of my apparent defeat, he dared to put his arm about me. With a sharp cry I wrenched myself from him.

"You do well to molest a helpless girl," I began, but before I could say more a strong hand seized the creature and hurled him into the roadway.

"You cad!" exclaimed a voice, and with quick, keen relief I recognised it as Marmion Wood's.

The other man sprang towards him savagely, then fell back a little as he saw who was his assailant, and laughing brutally, said,—

"Oh! I beg pardon, Wood. I had forgotten the employer might have an interest in the pretty clerk—"

But before he could finish his odious, insolent speech, Mr. Wood struck out sharply and felled him to the ground. Then, snatching my hand under his arm, he drew me away.

"Oh!" I said, "I am afraid you have hurt him very badly."

"I hope so," he retorted, grimly, not vouching a backward glance. "How long has this annoyance been going on?"

"A fortnight, I think; but it came to a climax to-night."

"I don't believe he'll interfere with you again; if he does, complain to me. I know the fellow well. He is a disgrace to humanity—a liar and a rascal. And, Miss Stretton, if you are wise you will take no notice of his last speech. Not a soul in the place would believe Arrowsmith's word."

I made no answer, being devoured with shame and pain, and Mr. Wood went on,—

"I am going to take you home now, and in future, at least till the nights are light, I think your mother should meet you."

"Mamma never goes out in the winter," I said, "she is too delicate. No, Mr. Wood, it would only worry her to tell her of this, so I shall keep silence."

He frowned and glanced sharply at me, then said,—

"Very well, of course you will please yourself in this matter; but it is only right that your safety should be your employer's care, so from this evening I shall dispute old Daltrey to escort you home. He is highly respectable, and far too old to figure as a lover."

"You are very kind," I began, when he stopped me sharply.

"Nothing of the sort; but I look on my employer as living creatures, not as machines. Is this your house? No, I'll not come in. Thank you. Good-night!" and, bowing, he turned away, whilst I went in to think over his generous kindness far more than was wise or good for me.

"Poor old Daltrey" had small occasion to walk home with me, although Mr. Wood insisted upon this service.

Never any more did Mr. Arrowsmith annoy me; in fact, I believe that he left Maxworth for a time, unable to meet my employer at the clubs or in the street, until the recollection of his punishment had grown less severe.

Meanwhile Dick Edmund grew in favour, and, although as reticent as ever about his past, I think mamma soon ceased to doubt him.

Hildred's beauty seemed daily to increase with her love; and when one day she met me with tears not unmixed with tears, and declared she

was the happiest girl in existence, I knew, of course, Dick had spoken and been accepted.

"I'm a poor man," he said that night, when we all sat together. "I shall never be anything else unless I achieve wealth by my own unaided efforts. It is only fair to you, Mrs. Stretton, and you," with an ardent glance at Hildred's dark, beautiful face, "to tell you by birth I am a gentleman, that my friends are rich and influential, but that I have quarrelled with them, and shall never advance one step towards reconciliation. We shall have to wait until I get a school before we can marry."

"That will not be hard," Hildred said, softly, and she whispered a few words, which brought a flush to Dick's cheek, a glad light to his bonny dark grey eyes.

He either forgot or ignored mamma's presence and mine in his joy, and, stooping his handsome head, kissed Hildred heartily, gratefully.

When he had grown a little more reasonable, I asked him of Walter.

"Is he under you? What sort of boy is he in school?"

"Are you in love with him, Belle?" he said, laughing, and affecting to despise my indignant rejoinder. "If not, why this anxiety concerning him? Well, my dear child, he is under Floyd's especial supervision; and he needs it, the idle, dissipitated, foolish young cub!"

"What a string of adjectives! But, really, is he so bad? I was inclined to think Mr. Wood a trifling unjustice to him."

"He could not very well be that. He's a graceful young scamp, and already addicted to the vice of gambling, of course under the rose! It is a puzzle to me—the difference between the brothers, I mean."

"They had different mothers. Walter prides himself upon that."

Dick looked a trifle contemptuous, and began to speak of other things.

The evenings were now growing light, but "old Daltrey," as every one called him, was not released from duty.

Always he walked patiently and slowly a little behind me, and I used to feel amused at my state. Surely no princess was more carefully guarded than I, the poor clerk.

I ought to have felt grateful to my employer, but I am afraid I was rather annoyed at this constant surveillance, and did not care to be treated like a child, or a helpless girl; but when I declared it was quite unnecessary longer to trouble old Daltrey, Marmion Wood turned upon me quickly with the question,—

"Have you found a better and more efficient escort?"

"No," I answered, somewhat sharply, I think, annoyed by his manner. "I am only wistful to spare trouble."

"Humph! I had no idea you were such a considerate young lady," he remarked, coolly, and there the subject dropped.

But the next day Daltrey was too unwell to come to the factory, and I prepared that evening for my lonely walk with a strong exultant sense of freedom; but in the street I was confronted by Mr. Wood.

"I am going to walk home with you," he announced, quite in a matter-of-fact tone. "Shall I drop behind, like the old man?" this with a gleam of mischief in his grey eyes.

"You will use your own discretion," I answered, demurely.

He laughed outright.

"I am afraid I wasn't cut out for a lacquey, Miss Stretton, so with your permission we will walk abreast," and he began to accommodate his long steps to my short ones.

"So your sister is engaged to Edmund?" he said, presently. "They will make a handsome pair. But how do they propose to live?"

"Oh! they have no idea of marrying yet. They must wait until Dick gets a school."

"And Miss Stretton loses youth and beauty. That is rough on her."

"She does not complain," I said, quietly.

"That means her engagement is no concern of mine. I am rebuked. But seriously, can't Edmund's people help the young couple?"

"He has no people."

"Lucky dog! I should like to stand in his shoes."

"I don't think you would; poverty and you would not agree."

"I should not remain poor," with a sudden flush in his eyes; "no woman should wear out her heart waiting for me."

"It is early yet for Hildred to think of marriage, and we are not in a hurry to lose her; the home is very happy now."

"I've been thinking," Marmion went on, Ignoring my words, "if it would not be wise to remove Walter from Floyd's and engage a private tutor. Do you think Edmund would care for the post? The remuneration would be good."

"Your kind plan is open to two objections," I said. "The first is, that next October your brother goes to Oxford, and Dick would be thrown out of employment again; the second, that his marriage would necessarily be still further postponed."

"I see; but I am not at all certain I shall send Walter to Oxford; if I do, both he and I will regret it; and yet it was my father's expressed wish, and the Lady Helena's too."

"He ought to be capable of judging between good and evil," I said, contemptuously; "and now, Mr. Wood, good-night, and thank you for your escort."

"I'm thinking 'the labourer is worthy of his hire'; won't you ask me in to tea? it's very lonely at 'The Swallows,' with Wal away."

"Come in," I said, not very heartily I am afraid.

I was wondering what entertainment we could provide for this man of money.

Mamma welcomed him with a sweet graciousness I could see won upon him, and we all sat down to tea in good spirits.

There was a wonderful cake of Hildred's concoction—"light as a feather," and delicately flavoured; and mamma provided cream of her own growing, which Marmion declared unusually good.

Then in the evening we sang together, and, to my surprise, I found Marmion Wood, beside having an excellent voice, was a good musician.

The hours flew by, and I was fast losing my awe of my employer.

"You sing well, and have a really good voice," he said to me, "but your playing leaves much to be desired."

They all laughed at his extreme frankness, and Hildred said,—

"Belle rarely practises, or she would soon improve; her touch is good."

"Her notion of time isn't," remarked Marmion, with a glance at me. "Are you angry, Miss Stretton? I know your temper isn't of the angelic type."

"No, I'm not angry; and my temper is all right when I am dealing with reasonable people."

"What inference am I to draw from that?" I asked.

"Any you please," demurely.

"Mrs. Stretton! I'm greatly afraid your youngest daughter has not that reverence for pastors, masters, &c., that one could wish; I may add, too, she treats me with a fine disdain on occasion."

"I am afraid you deserve it," mamma said, laughing; "Belle is not usually pugnacious or contemptuous."

"I am answered. It is very evident to me you are a prejudiced party. Miss Stretton, you will suffer to-morrow for my discomfiture to-night."

"Forewarned is forearmed, Mr. Wood; I think I shall take a holiday until your anger has subsided a little."

"You will do nothing of the kind, young lady," and shaking hands cordially, he bowed himself out, leaving mamma favourably impressed.

CHAPTER III.

WHEN I returned home the following evening it was a very grave trio that greeted me.

"What is the matter?" I asked. "What a party of ruffians you look!"

"Something very disagreeable has happened," Dick said; "there has been a robbery at the school, and the thief is undiscovered."

"Oh, Dick! How unpleasant for every one! Have you no suspicion of the guilty party? And what is missing?"

"I haven't the ghost of an idea who is the thief, and Floyd says he can trust his servants—they have been with him for years; so orders have been given that no boy shall leave the school on any pretence to-night, and if the pocket-book is not forthcoming in the morning the police will be called in. Floyd ought to have been more careful of his property. It appears he left the book on a table in the drawing-room, and when he returned for it an hour later it was gone."

"Did it contain much?"

"About twelve pounds in gold and twenty in notes. I hope the thief will restore them of his own will, and for his own sake, because Floyd swears he will prosecute the offender, unless he makes restitution by the morning."

"He has got to find him first. How horrible to feel there is a thief in your midst; but surely, Dick, you don't think it is one of the boys!"

"I don't know what to think; I wish I did. The wretched affair has quite spoiled our evening."

We talked of little beside the robbery that night, and when I went to business the following morning my mind was full of it, and I hardly performed my duties in a satisfactory fashion. Indeed, once or twice Mr. Wood had to complain of my carelessness; and finally I put down my pen saying—

"It is of no good. I can do nothing right to-day, and I am quite ashamed of myself!"

"Are you ill?" he asked, quickly, "or worried?"

"Worried, although it is absurd to be so when no suspicion can't fall on Dick," and then I told him the whole story, he listening with grave face and quiet eyes.

"It is a nasty affair," he said at the fialah, "and may do the school harm; unless, indeed, some stranger found entrance to the house and made off with the property. What does Esmond think of it?"

"He does not know what to think, and is in quite a state about it," and, as I spoke, a tall, dark figure passed the window, swiftly, and in another moment Hildred entered, unceremoniously. She did not even seem to see Mr. Wood, as she came hurriedly forward, her beautiful face white and wild, her eyes dilated and dusky with anguish.

"Oh, Belle!" she cried, "oh, Belle! they have arrested him, my Dick, and taken him to prison!" and, sinking into a chair, she covered her face with trembling hands.

"He never did it!" I cried, vehemently. "He could not do so low and mean a thing. Don't fret, Hildred; he must be acquitted!"

But she only rocked herself to and fro.

"I could not rest at home, so I came on here," and then she remembered Marmion. "I beg your pardon, Mr. Wood," she said, in a dazed way. "I have no right to come, but I think I am half mad. Of course, I know he is innocent, but how shall I prove it?"

"Try to be calm, Miss Stretton," said Mr. Wood, "and tell me all you know about this affair. If it is any comfort to you to hear it, pray believe I am as sure of Mr. Esmond's innocence as yourself."

"Oh, thank you, thank you! but, indeed, I know so little myself, I can only tell you the fact of his arrest. See, here is the note he sent, and the messenger did not wait to be questioned." She handed a slip of paper to him; on it were a few words in pencil.

"My darling, I have been arrested, but keep a brave heart, and believe me when I say I am not guilty."

"DICK."

"You must go to Doctor Floyd for information, and then we must think how to act. Understand, if any pecuniary assistance is needed I

charge myself with that! No, no thanks, if you please. Miss Belle, get on your wraps and go with your sister."

And whilst I was preparing for the walk he added,—

"There's Wal crossing the yard, he can tell us all we wish to know, and so spare you the pain of an interview with Floyd."

He went to the door and called the boy, who came slowly towards him. He looked flushed, and his eyes were bright, his manner excited.

"I came to see you, Marmion," he said in a high tone, "we've got a holiday, because there's been an awful kick-up at the school. The doctor's lost his pocket-book, and—but is Miss Stretton there? I don't want her to hear the news."

"She has heard already; come in and give us the details."

As he came into the room and saw Hildred, he changed colour and cried,—

"Oh! I say, Marmion, look here, I can't tell her, it would be too rough on her!"

"I wish to know all," Hildred said, quite quietly. "It is my right."

"Well, if you are bent on hurting yourself, I suppose you will. Esmond is under arrest, charged with stealing thirty-two pounds!"

"Go on."

"The book and notes were found in his desk, the gold was gone!"

"Oh!" gasped Hildred, looking as though she would faint. "Who placed them there?"

"Why, Esmond! I'm sorry Miss Stretton, he has turned out such a beastly cad, indeed I am."

"We can dispense with your comments," said Marmion, bluntly, "we only want facts."

"Well, then," sulkily, "a detective came into the school-room this morning and cross-examined the lot. The house was thoroughly searched, then we were asked for the keys of our desks. Esmond said his key was in his lock, that he had never been in the habit of using it. But when the detective went to his desk, it was not only locked but the key was missing, and then we all began to suspect him. A key was fitted to it, however, and there, sure enough, lay the book. When Esmond saw it he gave a great shriek, and sprang forward, swearing his innocence, and accusing some one of placing it there. Of course no one believed him, and he was marched off, after being allowed to write a few words to some one or another."

"He wrote to me," said Hildred; "and, despite everything, I believe him, and agree with him that some one has done this foul thing through spite, or to save himself from the discovery of his crime."

"That's all nonsense!" the boy retorted, insolently. "It is proved beyond doubt that Esmond is a blackguardly thief!"

Mr. Wood brought his hand heavily down upon his brother's shoulder.

"Stop that, Walter!" Then, in a lower tone, "You have been drinking!" and thrust him away.

"I only had a soda and brandy," he almost whined. "The whole affair was so horrid it upset me, and I wanted to steady my nerves."

Marmion gave him a look of unmitigated contempt; then, turning to me, said,—

"Take your sister home, and do not return to-day. I will come up in the evening to see if you can be of any use; and perhaps shall bring you a message from Esmond. I will see him if I can."

It was a wretched walk home. Hildred did not speak the whole way, but stared straight before her with wide and anguished eyes, and her face was white and rigid as death itself.

When we reached the house mamma met us at the door.

She had been crying bitterly, and tears came again as she put her arms about Hildred and kissed her.

"Don't, mamma, I cannot bear it yet. Please let me alone," and she walked up to her room as lightly and firmly as though her heart were a feather, and we two were left alone together. Then mamma broke utterly down, sobbing.—

"It was too awful! Oh! what had possessed Dick to commit such a dreadful act!" and not a cantly.

all my reasonings could persuade her of his innocence.

In the evening Marmion Wood came. He had not been able to see Dick, but had already secured the services of a brilliant barrister; and he spoke so hopefully, so kindly to Hildred, that the fire of her eyes softened, and her voice as she thanked him was less hard.

He told me he would spare me from the office the next day, because just at present Hildred must need me sorely, and was so different to his usual cool, business-like self that I was puzzled, ay, and glad too. For, foolish and presumptuous as it may seem, the poor clerk had dared to lay her heart at the master's feet, had learned to love him with all the strength and passion of her youth.

It was the desire of the moth for the star, and she was quite hopeless of winning any gaudon for herself, and yet she loved.

The next day we were permitted to see Dick. He looked very pale and haggard, but was quite firm and composed until Hildred, running forward, threw herself upon his breast in a passion of anguish, begging him, with streaming eyes, to believe she could never doubt or fail him, come what might, that shame, should shame fall upon him, should be shared and lightened by her; that, though all the world were leagued against him, she would never forsake him.

And I saw a mist rise before his honest, grey eyes, and the firm mouth grew tremulous as he thanked her for her love and faith, and spoke hopefully of his acquittal—more hopefully, I am sure, than he felt.

As the slow time wore by which must elapse before the trial we were hurt again and again by the careless tongues of those round us.

I think only Hildred, Marmion, and I believed in Dick; and really, to an outsider, it must have seemed impossible that he was innocent.

The facts that no one knew who or what he was, that he utterly refused to speak of his relations or his past, that the money stolen would have helped to forward a marriage he so much desired, all went against him, and it was our agony to know this.

Once Hildred urged him to divulge his identity, but he answered, "I should not do that now to save myself. I will never drag an old and honourable name through the mire."

But Marmion Wood, I knew, had instituted inquiries concerning his past and his family, hoping to elicit something in his favour.

And so we waited in sick suspense and pain for the trial and its result.

CHAPTER IV.

I HAD not seen Walter Wood for a week, and when he entered my office one morning I was astonished and concerned at the change in him; he looked wofully thin, and his haggard face was very pale, save for two bright spots upon the cheeks; his eyes were bright, unnaturally so, and his manner languid and feverish by turns. I determined to speak to Marmion of him, thinking even he must be remiss not to notice the change in the boy's appearance.

"You are ill, Master Walter!" I said, giving him a chair.

"Yes, I feel wretchedly, but Marmion does not notice or care; he thinks everybody has rude health like himself. I should like to go away a little while, to my mother's people. I am sure the change would be good for me."

"Why do you not mention your wish to Mr. Wood?"

Walter shrugged his shoulders.

"He would not grant it, and I hate asking just to be refused. He thinks I'm at school now, but old Floyd is not quite so unfeeling as Marmion and he sent me out for the day. Fact is I can't work," and he proceeded to light a cigarette, not taking my permission to smoke in my sanctum.

"You do too much of that," I said, significantly.

"Oh, don't preach, Miss Stretton. Leave all the disagreeables to my estimable brother, they agree with him."

"You are very unfair to Mr. Wood."

"Tis for that, my dear girl," with cool insolence. "Is he ever anything else to me!"

"If you only came here to air your grievances, you had best go."

He rose huffily.

"You'll not have to tell me that twice!" he said, and prepared to leave just as Marmion entered.

"You here, Wal! How is that? What is the matter with you?" and a shade of anxiety crossed his face as his eyes dwelt on the lad. "You look anything but well."

"Oh, I'm all right," peevishly, and not meeting his brother's regard, "that is, I'm only a little fatigued, and—Miss Stretton thinks a change of air would be good for me."

"Is that so? Well, why did you not ask for it sooner? It strikes me, Wal, if you smoked and drank less you would be as well as other folks. But I'm not going to lecture you now. I've some rather important business on hand with Miss Stretton, so clear off, youngster, and don't get into mischief."

There was something so excited and exultant in my employer's manner that so soon as we were alone I broke out.

"Oh! Mr. Wood, you have some good news for me! Is the real thief discovered, and our dear Dick vindicated!"

"Not so good as that, but we have now some powerful influence to work for us. I have discovered Esmond's friends, and they are willing, nay, eager, to help him. They are very influential people. Prepare for a surprise, Miss Stretton. He is heir to a title and splendid estates. Lord Chargrove's grandson!" and he paused, smiling at my sudden and intense astonishment.

The fact of Dick's grandeur, I confess, quite staggered me, and for a moment I was unjust enough to think when he was reconciled to his relatives he might not be quite so eager to marry our Hildred.

"You look frightened," Marmion said, "but I assure you there is nothing alarming in my announcement. It appears Esmond, or rather Chargrove, offended his grandparents by refusing to marry the wife they selected; and their resentment was fanned by a second grandson, cousin to Dick, who hoped through their alienation to succeed to the estates, which are not entailed, leaving only the barren title to Dick, who is the elder of the two. But shortly after Dick's disappearance the utter unworthiness of his second grandson was proved most conclusively to Lord Chargrove, who cast him adrift, and then instituted an unsuccessful search for the favourite."

"And what is his opinion of this dreadful affair!"

"Oh, he declares no Chargrove could be guilty of theft. And now for the end of my story: his lordship came to me on receipt of my letter. I will tell you another time how I discovered his relationship to Dick—and he is now waiting to see you."

"To see me!" I cried. "Have you told him anything of us—of Hildred!"

"Of course, and you must be prepared to find him not too well pleased about this engagement, although I fancy his consent will not be hard to win. Come with me."

So I followed him into a room set apart for the reception of his private visitors during business hours. I was rather nervous, I confess, but indignation that anyone could possibly object to receive our Hildred kept me, at least outwardly, from making an idiot of myself.

Lord Chargrove rose as we entered, and at sight of him all fear I may have felt vanished; he was such a little shrunken man, with a wrinkled, parchment-looking face, black eyes, keen and small as monkeys', and as utterly unlike Dick as it was possible to be.

He regarded me with an intentness which was very embarrassing, but apparently he was not greatly displeased or disappointed with me, for

presently he said in a rasping, but not unkindly, voice,—

"So you are the fiancée's sister! What does she say of this disgraceful matter?"

"That Mr. Esmond—I beg pardon, Mr. Chargrove, is innocent."

"Oh! Has she any idea of my grandson's position?"

"None; he never spoke of his relatives, and she was not curious."

"And what did she propose doing if Dick was convicted?"

"Waiting until the term of his imprisonment expired; then she would have married him and emigrated."

"Put on your things and take me to her. Mr. Wood, you will excuse this young lady for an hour or so!"

"For the day, if you wish it; make haste to get ready, Miss Stretton, his lordship confesses to a small stock of patience."

And soon I was walking by the side of Lord Chargrove, telling him all I knew of Dick's life since he came amongst us; and once I thought I caught the gleam of tears in the sunken eyes; but perhaps I was mistaken, for my lord said directly,—

"He is a young fool and always was, but blood is thicker than water, and I will do my best for him."

I knew to him our house must appear pitifully small, but from his expression when I ushered him into the parlour I felt he was pleasantly surprised by the air of elegance we had contrived to impart to it. And when Hildred entered, pale, but most beautiful in her pal or and grief, I knew she had made a conquest.

"I am Dick's grandfather," he said, "and have come to help him."

"He needs help sorely," she answered, with grave rebuke. "Why have you been so long coming? And understand, that whatever was your quarrel with—Dick, I am sure he was not in the wrong!"

He smiled at her earnestness, and saying,—"You are very loyal," drew her down beside him, and I left them alone, whilst he told Hildred the wonderful story of Dick's rank and future position.

The next thing that followed was an interview with Doctor Floyd, who, dearly loving a lord, and staggered by the thought of the charge he had brought against a nobleman's grandson, was willing—nay, eager—to withdraw it.

So my lord went to Dick, and to his intense anger, the young man said :

"I will not go into the world with this cloud upon my name. Floyd placed me here, and here, I will stay, until it is proved conclusively to him and others that I am not a thief."

"But if it goes against you—if you are convicted!"

"That would be hard to bear, but I can bear it, and on my release I should appeal (if that is possible) against the judgment."

"But think of the disgrace to a Chargrove of occupying a felon's cell!"

"I shall not be the first man who has done penance for a crime he never committed, and I can't believe that the worst will befall me. At all hazards, I shall stand my trial."

"You're an idiot, sir, a confounded idiot, and I'm ashamed of you!"

But when Hildred heard his decision, the proud tears rose to her beautiful eyes.

"He is doing right, and as only an innocent man dare do. I am very proud of my lover."

And although his lordship fumed and fretted, it was very evident in his secret heart he shared Hildred's pride in, and love for, poor Dick.

The days lengthened into weeks, and the time of the trial was very near now.

Hildred said nothing could be more awful than this suspense, and if it continued long she should go mad; and all of us did our best to comfort and cheer her, even the petulant, impatient old man now living in our midst.

Public opinion had veered round, too, now that it was known Dick would one day wear a title. The sin which an usher might commit was utterly impossible to an embryo lord, and many messages of sympathy and condolence reached

him. I am rather afraid Master Dick treated them cavalierly; he knew now who were his friends.

And at last the day before the trial came, and we shudderingly listen to the clangor of the judge. I was thankful that I had my work to occupy my thoughts, and pitied Hildred that she must sit at home with folded hands, waiting the end.

In the morning Marmion Wood had left Maxworth on some important business, but as he was going he said :

"I shall return by the seven train, if possible, but do not wait for me; I may not be able to get away until the mail."

So all that long day I sat alone, unvisited by any. Walter had gone to his mother's relations, and I was glad—not only because the boy's presence in the office annoyed me, or that he looked wretchedly ill, but I was quite sure he had got in with a bad set, and felt convinced some heavy trouble or disgrace was hanging over him.

Several times in the last few days I had seen a low-looking fellow loafing about the premises, and once he had stopped me to ask when "Young Wood meant to come back from Carlyon?" and when I answered "I did not know," he had muttered "He'd better look sharp, or I'll make it hot for him with his brother!"

I said nothing of this to Marmion, not wishing to prejudice him further against the young scapegrace, but none the less I was very troubled in my mind.

On the night of the judge's entrance, I left the office as usual at six o'clock, carrying the key with me, and it was not until quite late in the evening I remembered that I had not closed the window.

Remembering the strange man who had loitered about the premises, I felt nervous, because it was Marmion Wood's practice to keep a great deal of loose gold in the cash-box upon the mantel.

Without saying a word to mamma or Hildred, who were engaged with Lord Chargrove, I dressed hastily and stole out.

It was a lovely night in early summer, and the moon was at the full; the streets were quite light and full of people, for it was but little more than half-past nine.

I went hurriedly along, not feeling nervous in the least, and in a short while reached my destination.

My office lay in the rear of the other buildings, and was approached by a great yard overlooked by no windows.

I had come out in my house shoes, and they made little or no noise on the hard ground, and I had almost reached the office before I heard the sound of murmuring voices.

My heart seemed to stand still, and I grew cold with fright, but summoning my recreant courage to my aid I crept forward, crouching underneath the window, which now stood wide open.

I could hear every word that was spoken, and recognised the voices as those of the stranger and Walter, who was supposed to be far away.

CHAPTER V.

WHAT could it mean? I felt sick with dread of what this might signify to Marmion, and then in a flash it came to me that I knew the person who should stand in Dick's place.

"I tell you," Walter was saying, "I tell you I dare not do it; he will be sure to suspect me."

"How!" asked the other, guffaw; "he thinks you are far enough away. Force the box and give me the cash, or"—with a frightful oath—"I go to Floyd and tell him what I know! Where would you be then? I guess you wouldn't care to stand in Chargrove's shoes?"

"I'm sure," the wretched boy began, "I'm sure I never meant to do it; I must have been mad. I meant to put it back again."

"All people in your place talk like that; but who believes 'em?"

"Well, bat, Jonas, I've paid the debt over and over again."

"And if you have, ain't it worth your while to pay me to keep your secret? Give me the box, I'll break it open, it might be an ugly thing to carry away."

"But—but if Marmion should suspect Miss Stretton!"

"Let him," said the wretch. "The girl must take care of herself, as I do. Stand out of my way; and, mind, if you blab on me I'll murder you, as sure as my name's Thomas Jonas!"

"Oh dear, oh dear! moaned Walter, as Jonas began his nefarious work. "You will bring ruin on me. What shall I do?"

"Go back to Carlyon by the mail," responded the other, coolly, and as he spoke, I heard quick steps advancing, they heard them too, for Walter cried—

"Hark! there is someone coming," and impulsively I rose and looked into the office.

Walter stood white and shaking at the remote end of the office, while Thomas Jonas, still holding the cash-box in his hand, glared out at me with wild eyes, then, with a cry like that of a beast at bay, he sprang out of the window, striking at bat not touching me, and made off at utmost speed across the yard, only to turn when half-way, and rush wildly to and fro to find some way of egress.

Then I recognised the tall figure that had interrupted the wretch, and watched with bated breath the issue of this thing. And all the while Walter stood motionless, helpless, awaiting discovery.

Once more my employer's strength and swiftness stood him in good stead, for suddenly I saw him raise his clenched fist, and the man went down before him like a log. Then I ran to his side. He turned with an expression of utmost astonishment upon me.

"Miss Stretton! What are you doing here? Never mind telling me now; but bring me some rope. I want to make this fellow fast before he recovers his senses."

I found a loose collar, and swiftly and dexterously Marmion bound Jonas' hand and foot, and then, rising said,—

"Come with me to the office, and let us see what else besides the cash-box has been tampered with."

I thought of his agony of shame when he should see Walter there and know him guilty, and my heart was torn with pity. I would have shielded the wretched boy if it had been possible, for his brother's sake; but for Dick's I must speak. So now I only laid my hand upon his arm, saying,—

"Don't go yet, Mr. Wood. There is someone else there, someone you could not, would not, suspect! Oh, how shall I tell you!"

"Speak out!" he said, sternly. "Who is it?"

I said Walter's name in a whisper; but, faint as it was he heard it, and stood quite still a moment, then said in a loud voice,

"What! I'll not believe it! My brother in league with a common thief! You are mad!"

"I almost wish I were," I answered, sadly, but without another word he went forward, I following. I saw him look in at the open window at the white, wild face, and shivering young figure, and heard him groan, "Oh, Heaven!" and then he vaulted in, and I believe, Walter thought of murder, for he screamed loudly to me for help. Marmion said,—

"Go to the door, Miss Stretton, and let yourself in," and in silence I obeyed.

"Marmion," the boy began, reassured a little by my presence. "I never meant to do it. I'll tell you all the truth, upon my honour I will. If you hadn't been so hard with me I would have confessed before."

"Go on," the other said, sternly, "lay the blame of your misdeeds upon my shoulders! Make haste with your story!"

"I—I have been betting and playing a little, and I owed Jonas money, and though I gave him all I could scrape together, he threatened to come to you. I—I was afraid, and when you sent me to Carlyon I was thankful, but Jonas found out I

from one of the fellows where I had gone, and wrote me yesterday to come back at once or I should rue it. So I made an excuse to get away, and reached Maxworth just at dusk this evening. Jonas was waiting for me, and was very terrible. I had no money to give him, but I—I—oh, Marmion, you will kill me!" in a sudden access of terror, as the stern, white face was bent intently upon him.

The other motioned him savagely to go on.

"I remembered you always kept some gold here, and I told Jonas of it. I thought he would come alone and force an entrance, but he made me accompany him, and we found the window open. Upon my honour, Marmion, I tried to save the money—I did, indeed."

"I want no lies! You are my brother, and I cannot punish you, and as you are equally guilty with Jonas, I must extend the same clemency to him. Get your hat and come with me."

Then, although I knew how sorely I must hurt the man I so loved, I said,—

"There is more to tell—Walter. Remember I heard all."

He looked at me wildly, his lips twitched, and the sweat of agony was on his brow.

"Oh, I dare not—I cannot tell. Miss Stretton, have mercy! O! Marmion, I shall die if it!" and he writhed in his dread and shame.

"Is there more? Great Heaven! that he should be so old in iniquity! Say out, boy, what have you to say."

He sank down at Marmion's feet crying out,—

"I did it! I did it! It was I who stole the doctor's pocket-book."

I shall never forget the expression on Marmion's face as he receded from the abject, weeping lad; the scorn and hate, the passion of shame and loathing. He lifted his hand, and I feared he would have struck the boy; but instead he turned away with a groan and stood a moment with bowed head as if his anguish was greater than he could bear. Then he came back to where Walter still crouched, and dragging him forcibly to his feet, bade him follow us.

"Esmond's name has been publicly disgraced, as ours will be to-morrow. It is an eye for an eye, and if Floyd metes you the measure he meted Esmond, I shall not stand between you and your just punishment. Don't tell me more now. Let me win a little self-control first. I will hear your story in the presence of witnesses—and to-night."

We crossed the yard together. Jonas was conscious now and swearing horribly. Marmion stood looking down upon him a little, and something in his glance cowed the man.

"I am going to set you at liberty, because of the two, you are less guilty than that wretched boy; but if ever you dare to molest or tamper with him again, if ever you show your face in Maxworth after to-night, I shall know how to act!" He stooped, and cutting the cords that bound him, "You understand?" he said, as the man rose stiffly to his feet.

Jonas nodded, and shuffled off at a more rapid rate than one would have thought possible, and having seen him clear of the premises we went out into the open streets, Marmion keeping tight hold of Walter's shoulder.

The boy was ghastly, and I could scarcely refrain from pitying him, he looked so shrunken and cowed, but he ventured to ask,—

"Where are we going?"

"To Miss Stretton's, where the first act of atonement will take place," and not another word passed between us throughout the walk.

At our gate I paused.

"Mr. Wood," I said, "it will be easier for all if I tell the news. You are already tried beyond your strength."

"I am the fittest judge of that!" in a strange, hard voice. "Please lead the way," and when he spoke like that what could I do but obey?

We found the trio I had left still conversing, happily ignorant of my adventure or absence; and mamma started with a cry when she saw I was dressed for walking.

"Madam," said Marmion, "I apologise for my

intrusion at so late an hour, but business of importance compels my presence. I have to tell you Mr. Esmond's—rather Chargrove's—innocence is proved uncontested."

"Oh, thank Heaven!" broke from mamma, but Hilda could not speak, only her eyes shone through sudden, passionate tears of joy.

Lord Chargrove rose and put out his hand.

"Mr. Wood, how shall I thank you for your good news?"

To his surprise, Marmion refused the offered hand, saying in a savage way,—

"Don't be so profuse with your thanks until you have heard the tale this boy can tell. The shame and misery Chargrove has endured unjustly are ours by right. Here is the thief—now let him make what reparation is in his power."

As they all fell back from Walter, as I saw the scorn and hate with which they regarded that lonely young figure, I plied him against my will, and would have helped him if I could. Perhaps Marmion saw this, for he motioned me, impudently, to be seated, and so Walter was left, standing in the centre of the room, with four pairs of eyes fixed upon him. As for me, I could not look at him throughout his recital of his sin, but bent my eyes persistently upon the floor. To my surprise he told it with very few breaks; it seemed to me his shame was far less than his dread of punishment either by the law or Marmion.

"I got in with some betting fellows, who told me they could lay money out for me advantageously, and Jonas was one of them. He was always telling me of fortunes made on the turf, and I believed him; he lent me money, too, and I fully meant to pay him, but luck went dead against me, and I dared not ask Marmion to help me. Jonas kept threatening me with exposure, and I was at my wits' end what to do, when one day (it was the twelfth of April) as I passed the drawing-room, I saw the doctor count out some pieces of gold; some he put into his pocket, the others he returned to the book. I wished then they were in my possession, but I did not think of—of theft. I went downstairs, and looking from a window of the schoolroom, I saw Jonas lurking about. He signalled me threateningly. Directly after, just when I was mad with the fear of detection, the doctor came through the hall, and I wondered if he carried his pocket-book. I am sure I can't say what impulse made me rush upstairs again—but the drawing-room door stood open still, and on a table was the pocket-book, looking very bulky. I went in and—and—oh! can't you guess? Marmion, don't make me say more!"

"Go on," Mr. Wood said, coldly; and Walter obeyed, trembling.

"I took out the gold and, running out, gave it to Jonas on account; the notes I dared not use, I was so afraid the doctor knew their number. That night the—the loss—"

"The robbery!" supplemented Marmion, grimly.

"Was discovered, and I did not know what to do. I'd have put the pocket-book back, but I had paid away the gold. Then the doctor determined to call in a detective the following morning unless the loss was made good. I could not think how to act, especially as we were forbidden to leave the house. Then I thought as I slept alone, it would be easy for me to slip down in the night and get out of the schoolroom; I meant to bury the book. And after the servants had closed all windows I went back and lifted one gently; but I suppose somebody discovered it, for when I went down after midnight it was again closed, and I dared not risk any damage by opening it. I looked round and I saw that Esmond's desk was open. I never for a moment dreamt the master's desk would be searched, so I thrust the pocket-book in and, locking it, brought away the key. When the robbery was heard of, Jonas instantly suspected me. The sum I paid him tallied so exactly with that the doctor lost; and he made me confess all. Since then, I'm sure, my life has been a misery to me," and he looked pitifully round.

Not the least hint of remorse for the misery and shame inflicted upon Dick! so that I

scarcely wondered when Hildred said, vehemently,—

" If he forgives you, he is more than mortal; I cannot!"

CHAPTER VI.

I SHALL never forget the excitement in Maxworth when the name of the real thief was known, or the tempest of sympathy for Dick.

Doctor Floyd was enraged beyond measure. I think quite as much because he had caused the arrest of an embryo lord as at the treachery of Walter Wood.

But for Dick's entreaties, I think he would have punished the boy as he deserved. And Marmion stood proudly, and sternly aside saying,—

" It must be as Chargrove wishes; if he demands such reparation, it is right!"

But Dick proved himself generous in this as in all other matters.

" It has all come out, and I am cleared," he said; " let the poor wretch go. He is a lad, and perhaps has a long life before him, it ought not have a shadow of prison walls thrown upon it."

" But do you forgive him?" Hildred asked, anxiously.

" No, I don't!" emphatically; " it would be humbug to say I do; very likely I never shall. But for all that he shall go free, partly for his brother's sake, partly because he is too low a thing for hate;" and the scorn in his fine eyes was a thing to be remembered.

The doctor was one of those to visit him just before his liberation, and Dick's manner to him was very cold.

" My dear Edmund—I mean Chargrove—I have to ask your pardon for my hasty judgment and harsh measures," he said; " but even you will acknowledge appearances were against you; and, perhaps, if you had been less resolute as to your station and friends, I might have been more believing."

" No doubt," said Dick, with a faint sneer. " The heir to a title could not be guilty of such a vulgar crime as theft. I think, sir, I was treated with gross unfairness."

" I am sorry that should be your opinion," awkwardly. " Situated as I am, held responsible for the welfare of so many, what else could I do?"

" You might have allowed me time to investigate the affair."

" I am truly sorry, Chargrove, and I can say no more. I assure you when Mr. Wood brought that young scamp to the school, and compelled him to confess all in front of the scholars, I was literally dazed; and my first conscious feeling was intense regret for my hastyess. We may still be friends, I hope!"

" We were never that, I think, sir, at best; we shall never be anything but acquaintances," and so the interview ended, much to the doctor's discomfiture.

Lord Chargrove went down to the prison alone, mamma, Hildred and I following in a cab; and, reaching the gates, we were not a little surprised to find quite a crowd of people standing round.

It transpired that the doctor's pupils had determined to give Dick an ovation, and the little assembly had, of course, attracted many others to the spot.

As we drew up one lad started three cheers for the beautiful Miss Stretton, but Hildred shrank further into her corner, white as death with her passionate joy and excitement.

Then the doors were swung open, and Dick appeared with Lord Chargrove on his arm.

Poor boy! he was pale and worn, but the bonny eyes were bright and the firm lips smiled kindly on the lads.

Such a cheer as broke out then I never heard before or since; it was positively deafening, and Dick stood still in the midst of them, more moved than he care to show, unable for a moment to speak, even could he have made himself heard; and Lord Chargrove's face was a sight to see in its pride and delight.

Then a man pushed his way through the crowd

and my heart gave a great leap as I recognised Marmion—but what a changed and haggard Marmion.

Instantly the cheers died out, and everybody watched and listened, as putting out his hand, he said in a clear, loud voice,—

" Will you shake hands with me, Chargrove? In my brother's name and my own I ask your forgiveness, and thank you for your generosity."

We could not hear Dick's reply, but we knew it was satisfactory by Marmion's expression and Dick's smiling face.

The former did not linger longer, but, bowing, to Lord Chargrove, turned about, and disappeared through the crowd.

Then uncle and nephew came towards us, and with a little squeak we were all seated together, Dick having fast hold of Hildred's hand.

" They are cheering you, dear love!" he said; " cannot you show yourself a moment?"

She leant forward then, her beautiful, happy face, down which the tears were streaming, instinct with gratitude and love. And so in triumph we drove away; but my heart was sore with sympathy for Marmion's shame and grief.

That day was a very happy one for us all (despite my thoughts of Marmion), and it seemed mamma could not do enough to atone for her suspicions, which Dick gallantly declared were quite natural.

" You understand, grandfather," he said, when we had grown more rational, " that I only return to you on one condition—that my wife receives that welcome and honour due to her, that rather than lose her I would willingly forego my birth-right."

" You might wait until you're asked to do so," retorted his lordship, peevishly. " Do you suppose you are the only one alive to her worth and beauty! Come here, my dear. Lady Chargrove is not only anxious to welcome you into the family, but she already loves you for your loyalty to her scampish grandson."

" Thank you," Hildred said, simply. " I will try to merit her kindness always," and she sat down by the old man, her hand in his.

" Now we are somewhat restored to our normal condition, Dick, it is high time we discussed business. Mrs. Stretton, you have no objection to an early marriage for these young people?"

" Indeed, no; Dick is worthy my child, and will make her happy."

" Don't be too sure of that, madam; he's not much to boast of. But I have been thinking some arrangement should be made at once for your future and that of Miss Belle."

" Of course," broke in Dick, " our home is theirs."

" No, no," mamma said, hurriedly. " Young people are best alone, and Belle and I have more than enough for our wants."

" That is all nonsense, if you will excuse me for saying so, madam; it would not be seemly for the future Lady Chargrove's mother to keep a lodging-house, and her sister to figure as corresponding clerk."

" I can see nothing unseemly in such a state of affairs," mamma said, with a touch of pride.

" No lady is disgraced by labour!"

" Good Heavens! you did not suppose I implied that for a moment. How obstinate and obtuse folks can be when they choose! See here, I have a pleasant little place standing empty, why should you not move there?"

" Dick marries Hildred, and not her family," I said, sharply.

" Children should be seen and not heard; and it shows very small affection for your sister to be so willing to part with her!"

" Oh," cried Hildred, " I understand mamma and Belle too well to doubt their affection; but I am most grateful to you for your generous offer, and hope they will be induced to accept it."

" In our case would you do so?" mamma asked, gently, and Hildred's silence answered for her.

Lord Chargrove was very angry, Dick very disappointed, but there was no moving mamma and me; and finally his lordship said, unjustly enough,—

" You must be very fond of your work. I should have gained the day but for you, Miss Belle."

" I am fond of it," I answered, coolly, ignoring the latter half of his sentence. " It is easy and not beyond my powers."

" One is tempted to fancy there is some other attraction at the office than your work," he remarked, looking keenly at me.

" You have no right to say such a thing to me," I retorted, and left the room in high dudgeon.

The following morning I returned to my labours to find Marmion Wood already at work; he looked up as I entered with a faint smile; but it hurt me cruelly to see how haggard and harassed he looked.

" I am glad you have come," he said, " for I've any amount of work to get through this day; I am going away to-morrow."

" Going away!" I echoed, feeling my heart failing me sadly.

" Yes, it is impossible for Walter to stay here, and his mother's relatives have utterly washed their hands of him; so to-morrow we start for Germany. A personal friend of mine is one of the tutors at Heidelberg, and I shall place Walter under his care for the next three years. Oxford is out of the question for him now; his fame would go before him, and not a decent fellow would take him up. I hope he has got a good lesson, but, harsh as is my sound, I'm afraid he is only soared, not remorseful."

" That is dreadful; but he is very young, and his character is hardly yet formed. When do you return, Mr. Wood?"

" Oh, in about ten days, I suppose," he answered, and then no more was said for awhile, and only the scratching of our pens disturbed the silence.

But at last, looking up and meeting Marmion's intent gaze, I asked,—

" Mr. Wood, will you tell me how you chanced to be at hand that awful night?"

" I had only just got into Maxworth, and as I wanted to get some letters off by the first post next morning, I came here to write them."

" I—I have wanted to tell you often how sorry I am for my carelessness in leaving the window open, but for that, access would not have been so easy for Jones."

" You shall not blame yourself," he cried. " You have served me always faithfully and well."

And my heart leapt up at his praise. I am not sure my voice was as steady as it should have been when I thanked him for his good opinion of me. I know that, despite the fact of his early departure, I was very happy.

All day long we worked unflaggingly, and at six we were tired enough to be glad rest was coming, but Marmion seemed in no hurry to go.

He looked moody and troubled, and I wondered if any fresh anxiety had cropped up; presently he said,—

" When is your sister to be married?"

" In a very short while; she goes next week to Chargrove, to make her ladyship's acquaintance; then the preparations will commence at once."

" You do not go with the happy pair? You were not included in the invitation!"

" No to your first, yes to your second question. Lord Chargrove has behaved most generously, and I told him of his goodness."

" Of course Mrs. Stretton has accepted, and I shall lose you!"

" You are mistaken. We remain here. Don't you know we are very independent?"

" But you will not like such a state of affairs!"

" I shall like it best. Mr. Wood, are you—are you anxious I should go?" I questioned, fearing what his answer would be.

" What?" he asked. " Are you so blind as that, Belle? I don't know what I should do without you, in more ways than one. I am glad to feel that when I return you will be here to welcome me. But I am wondering how long your resolution will hold out against Miss Stretton's entreaties."

" I will stay with you as long as you wish," I

said, trying to speak calmly, although, indeed, the change in his manner had filled me with a great and tremulous joy.

"Then you don't hold that my brother's shame is reflected on me!"

"No, no. How could you fancy such a thing? Oh, Mr. Wood, I am grieved, most grieved for you."

"I believe you are, child." He had risen now and was preparing to go, but all at once he turned. "Wish me good-bye, Belle."

"Good-bye," I faltered, and suddenly I felt myself lifted in those strong arms and kissed once upon the mouth, and before I could thoroughly realize these things I was gone.

Giddy with sudden, passionate joy, I fell on my knees, and, through fast-falling tears, thanked Heaven for this man's love.

CHAPTER VII.

HILDRED had gone to Chargrove, and mamma and I were alone. I think mamma must often have felt wretchedly isolated in those days. I, of course, had my work, and a sweet, secret hope to buoy me up. "He loved me," I was as sure of that as of my own identity. Marmion was not the man to mislead a woman, or play with her heart. That first kiss of his had set me aside from all other lovers, had made me sacred to him, and I felt that he had regarded it in that light. I was not ashamed now to think he perhaps had guessed my love. I was proud, oh! so proud, to belong to him, and my work was sweet to me for his sake. Sometimes I caught mamma looking anxiously at me, and once she said,—

"What has come to you child? You are so quiet and yet you look so happy."

"I am happy," I interrupted, with a little laugh. "Very happy and proud too, as you should be of our Hildred's great, good fortune."

But I knew she did not accept my words as downright earnest truth. She guessed there was more in the background and grew more watchful of me.

I had almost hoped that Marmion would write me, but no letter came, and I tried hard not to feel disappointed. So the ten days wore by, and on the eleventh morning I was vain enough to make my toilet as pretty as possible, wishing to find favour in Marmion's eyes.

I walked like one in a dream, and my great joy made me sick and faint. I trembled as though with cold, although it was a hot summer's day, and was very glad when I reached my office.

Would he come this morning? I was not at all sure he had returned, and the suspense was all but intolerable.

I tried to work, and am free to confess I made small headway, that what I did achieve left much to be desired in the way of improvement.

Ten o'clock arrived, but did not bring Marmion, and just as I was ready to burst into tears of vexation and disappointment, I heard his step outside.

I could not rise; to this day I cannot tell how I greeted him (for the matter of that his memory is equally treacherous). I could hardly see him for the mist before my eyes, but I knew he came towards me with outstretched hand, saying,—

"How do you do, Miss Stretton?" and the formal greeting struck coldly on my heart.

"How have you managed in my absence? How is your work getting on to-day?" he questioned next, and like lightning came the dreadful thought that he did not care for me, that his caress had been the outcome of gratitude for my sympathy and adherence.

I answered somewhat incoherently, I think, and the next moment he was bending over me, looking with critical eyes at the letter before me.

"What shocking writing," he said, very coolly, and leant so near that I felt the touch of his cheek upon mine. "Miss Stretton, this will never do."

I laid aside my pen, thinking wildly was there no way of escape for me, when he suddenly took my cold and trembling hands in his.

"Belle, I shall have to discharge you for carelessness. I must really find someone more competent to fill your place. Aren't you ashamed of yourself? Way, Belle! Belle! you are on the verge of tears. What is the matter, you silly child? Are you angry with me because I kissed you when we parted? Should you be still further enraged if I repeated the operation?" and with that he lifted my hot face and kissed my mouth, not once but many times.

Then he sat down beside me with the air of a man who had done his duty. Putting an arm about me he drew me close, and I loved him, if possible, more in that hour than I ever had done before.

"Belle," he said, "are you going to make me happy? Am I to make ready for my bride? What a shabby little puss it is," and it struck me, even in the midst of my joy, that there was a distinct individuality even in his wooling. "Didn't you guess that I wanted you, Belle?"

"No; not until—until—"

"Well; don't leave your sentence incomplete. It is bad form."

"Until you—you kissed me," I murmured, hiding my face on his coat; "then I thought—I thought you cared for me a little."

"Oh! she imagined I cared for her a little! What a modest young person she is! And she never supposed my heart was full of her, that I was making a gross idiot of myself because of her, that I was as deeply, desperately enamoured as any love-sick Romeo!"

"But were you really, Marmion?" I questioned eagerly.

"Yes, I was, you blue-eyed witch, and confoundedly ashamed of myself I was, just at first—not now. Heaven bless you, darling, you have made me the happiest man under the sun."

He spoke very earnestly then, his deep voice full of feeling, and instinctively I lifted my face to his.

"Marmion," I said, "I will pray night and day to be worthy of you, to make you as happy as you deserve to be."

"Worthy of me! Don't you know, sweet-heart, that however well a man may order his life, it yet shows dark beside the whiteness of a good woman's?" Then in a lighter tone, "And now, Miss Stretton, perhaps you will confess the reason for this great and much-to-be deplored change in my once orderly clerk; do you think any one of those letters decent enough to pass through the post?"

"No, I don't, but the fault is yours," I said, snappily.

"I see. You were so filled with thoughts of my return that your work suffered in consequence? I am so flattered that I can only rejoice in the carelessness of which I formerly complained.

"I will do my best to atone for it," I said. "Shall I begin at once?"

"No, no! This morning shall be sacred to love; and, Belle, I suppose you know we can't go on like this! I must find a new assistant, not a young lady, or you might be jealous, and the best thing we can do is to ratify our engagement as quickly as possible."

"Do not be in a hurry; I have mamma to think about, and I am only eighteen; there is plenty of time."

"No, there is not; I mean to grasp my happiness as soon as I can. If you are 'only eighteen' I am nearly double your age, and so have no time to spare. As for your mother—my mother now—her home is with us. Hush! It is ill-mannered to interrupt. We are going to form a 'happy family,' and I propose we should be married without delay. It would be fun to steal a march on Chargrove and Hildred."

"Indeed it would not, sir; I am not going to usurp my sister's privileges, and compel her to dance in a tub—"

"What on earth do you mean?"

"Mr. Wood! are you so ignorant as not to know that when a younger sister marries first, the eldest must dance in a tub, or she remains an old maid to the bitter end!"

"Do you know any more old women's tales, Belle? I am interested."

"Really? Oh, well, mamma can make you well acquainted with the folklore of these parts. You will find her an admirable substitute for me."

"I haven't the least doubt of it; but I prefer drawing my information from you. I am interested in watching the phases of your character—learning the trick of your voice and gestures."

"Thank you, but I object to such intent criticism."

"Jeering aside, Belle, when are we to be married?"

"That is for you to say," I retorted, my cheeks growing uncomfortably hot. "You are such a tyrant that I dare not have an opinion of my own."

"You are an audacious fibber. When is Hildred to give up her freedom?"

"On the second of October. Oh! poor Hildred!"

"And, oh, poor Belle! We'll make it a double wedding."

"I see that your motive is mean, sir! you wish to divide the attention I ought to receive between us—and a bride ought to be the cynosure of all eyes!"

"The vain little soul! This is a new feature in your character."

"No, it is a very old one; I am horribly conceited, and shall be worse in the future, because I have secured that most renowned woman-hater and determined bachelor, Marmion Wood, Esquire."

"He isn't much of a bargain, Belle, and have you thought that, at least once a year, you will have to endure Walter, that is until his majority. Can you do it?"

"For your sake, yes; and for your sake, too. I can forgive him; it were hard if I could not."

So we sat talking until the golden morning wore away; it was not my habit to return home at noon, but on this particular day Marmion made me dress, and together we went through the long, hot streets.

Folks who knew us glanced very curiously at us. I am afraid I wore an absurdly conscious expression, and I know Marmion exhibited an altogether uncalled-for pride in me.

Mamma was not a little astounded when we entered the house, and quite scared when Marmion said he had come to lunch.

"I don't wish to seem inhospitable," she said, laughing, "but I must warn you there is nothing but cold meat and salad in the house."

"We are more than content, are we not Belle? And if you can put up with me, I intend spending the remainder of the day with you, mother!"

What an astonished face she turned upon him.

"What do you mean? What is there between you?"

And then I ran to her, and threw my arms about her, whilst Marmion said,—

"Give me a fair chance, Belle; like a dutiful son I want to embrace my maternal parent. The truth is, dear Mrs. Stretton, that Belle has coaxed me into some sort of engagement which requires your sanction."

Mamma held me a little from her, and I saw the happy tears in her eyes.

"You are a lucky girl," she said, gently.

"That is what I am trying to impress upon her," remarked Marmion, coolly, "but she is so very obtuse," and then he stooped his tall head and kissed mamma, who blushed and laughed prettily. But the next moment she said, sadly,

"So I have lost both my girls!"

"Belle is not lost—mother! (I may call you that!) and you have gained a son. Our home must be yours, because it is not to be supposed for an instant I can manage this unruly girl alone and unaided."

And so it was arranged mamma and I were not to be parted, that her home was to be always with us; and Marmion began to discuss our wedding in that high-handed way peculiar to him, until mamma said, laughingly, I had taken a tyrant to myself, and would need all her sup-

port and protection to enable me to endure him.

Of course I was not to go back to the office—a fact I somewhat regretted, for I liked the work.

But I had my trousseau to occupy my time and attention, so that the days flew rather than wore by.

Hildred's congratulations were hearty, and her joy sincere; Lord Chargrove, too, sent a kind letter, begging that I would agree to be married at Chargrove, saying that the arrangement would be satisfactory to all.

And so it was all settled, and Marmion laughed at my fears that I should not bear my new honours gracefully or well, and there was wanting not a few to envy my great good fortune, or to complain "that those lucky Sreeton girls" had secured most eligible parts, although they had no money and no position to boast of.

CHAPTER VIII.

TOWARDS the end of September we travelled down to Chargrove, where we found Hildred installed as one of the family, and already the darling of Lady Chargrove.

We were welcomed warmly, and any nervousness I may have felt quickly wore away. The old lady was so kindly, so anxious to make our visit a pleasant one, and there was so much in her manner and appearance to remind one of Dick that we were soon very good friends.

She was good enough to say never had the old Hall held two such bonnie brides as Hildred and me, and I am quite sure our respective lovers shared her opinion.

Walter had not been invited to the wedding, his presence could but have been a disagreeable element in an otherwise happy circle; so Marmion had written merely acquainting him with the date and the place we intended passing through on our honeymoon trip.

He received no reply, but on the first of October a small parcel was brought to me by Lady Chargrove's own maid.

"Another present, miss," she said, her pleasant elderly face beaming in sympathy. "You are a lucky young lady."

"I think I must agree with you, Franklin. Stay a moment, would you not like to see it?" and pleased with what she called my condescension, she remained, watching eagerly as I removed the wrappings. "It is from Mr. Wood's brother," I explained; "the postmarks tell me that!" And lifting the lid, I saw lying on purple velvet a most exquisite necklace of pearls.

Franklin gave a cry of admiration, whilst I sat silently regarding the gift; wishing for many reasons Walter had been less lavish.

"You'll wear it to-morrow, miss!" said the maid.

"No; it is very beautiful, but pearls mean tears, and I'll not wear anything so ill-omened on my wedding-day!"

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CHAPTER XII.

"Our last day in Abbey Chester, for which be many thanks!" cried Maggie Delane, as the two girls sat at breakfast the morning which followed Sir Keith's Mortimer's magnificent fete. "Farewell to the smuts and the smoke for ever. I hope, and yet," Maggie blushed prettily for an instant, as she added, "yet this dingy place must ever be hallowed for me, for here it was my happiness came."

"Yes, and that sends even the smuts into the background, does it not, Maggie?"

Vera smiled lovingly at her friend, who had fallen into a pleased reverie.

There was silence for a few minutes, and then Maggie woke up.

"Vera," she said, "do you know what you are going to do, as soon as the tour is over?"

Vera shook her head.

"I have no idea. Another tour, I expect—the endless round of dingy towns, the same weary, horrible existence, only worse than ever this time for you will be gone, dear."

Maggie went forward, and kissed the fair face.

"I don't quite know whether it will be the same thing. Went and I have been discussing you and your future, and we have come to the conclusion that it would be selfish—not to say cruel—to leave you all alone, so I mean to talk to Nathaniel, and get him to let you come home with me for a time. You know our marriage will be as soon as ever it can be when this engagement terminates, and you will be no end of a comfort to me. What do you say?"

"Say!" repeated Vera, "you know, Maggie, how much I should like it; but he will never consent. I have vexed him more than I ever did before by refusing Mr. Robinson's offer. He quite frightened me last night; there was something so strange about him."

"Only a little more drunk than usual," summed up Miss Delane, curtly. "With the Earl gone off safely, Nathaniel indulged to his heart's content; besides, he is a coward. Only look at him with those great true eyes of yours, and you will shame his soul out of him."

Vera sighed.

"You may be right, dear, but I can never grow accustomed to him in those fits. Do you know, Maggie, after Mr. Robinson went yesterday morning I felt almost sick with fright, for the first time in my life! It is in such moments that I understand my mother's loathing horror of her life. I can remember once, when I was a very, very small child seeing him strike her, and the same strange dread came over me yesterday that I felt all those years ago."

"Brute!" muttered Maggie, beneath her breath; out loud she said, cheerfully,—

"You are nervous and upset, dear, that is all, only let Nathaniel try on any of those little games with you. Why, every member of the company would be on him to a man."

"Always a comforter, Maggie," Vera smiled, cheerfully. "Now let us change the subject. What are you going to do to-morrow?"

"Went wants me to drive with him to call on some relations who live quite close here. I feel horribly nervous at the thought of going. I expect to be received with coolness, not to say frigidity, but as I have to go through it, I may as well begin first as last. The train to Netherland does not start till evening. Thank Heaven, our next stop will be better than this. The Netherland audiences, too, are as nice as they can be, but I don't like leaving you, Vera. What do you say to coming with us?"

"Certainly not. There is an old adage that says 'two is company, &c., &c.' Both girls rose, and Vera smiled as she spoke. "Besides," she added, "I shall have a long morning at study. Mr. Robinson was so much in earnest in his promise to help me whenever I elected to ask him that it has given me a sort of impetus. If I cannot leave the stage, at least I can prepare myself for a higher walk in it."

"And you will rise," observed Maggie, with a faint sigh of envy. "Now, if I stayed a hundred years in the profession, I should play fairy princess to the last."

Then eschewing further conversation the two girls turned to the piano and spent an hour in careful practice; after that Mr. Mote brought a carriage round, and took his love for a drive, and Vera filled the rest of the day by writing a long letter to Amy, putting Maggie's and her own things together, and, lastly, by going down to the theatre.

Mr. De Mortimer proved thoroughly sober this evening. His face looked pale; there was a nasty, ugly expression of anger in his eyes as Vera came into the green-room on her way to her dressing-room.

It was how he had looked the night she had refused the diamonds, and Rex Darnley had struck him down. She shut the door of the whitewashed apartment, and sat down to think;

Maggie was not arrived yet. She was alone—alone with the burden of thoughts that enthralled and yet pained her.

Sometimes a beautiful vision would rise for an instant in her mind. She saw the luxurious library, beheld that grave, coldly, handsome face, with a look of suppressed emotion on his lips, and heard once again the low tones of his voice, saying,—

"You, who are to me the purest, the fairest of Heaven's creatures. Vera, you judge me wrongly. Though I have known you but three days those days answer for years. You have never left my mind."

They were not unknown words to Vera. Young as she was, she had had love poured in her ears from many a man, who, dazzled by her loveliness, was carried away to declare his passion, but none had remained impressed on her memory save those few uttered by Rex Darnley. She forgot even that the Earl of Vivian and Tom Watson both had spoken the same theme. If she recalled it, it was pain, no pleasure; but Darnley's sudden earnestness had startled her, and would never be effaced from her recollection.

For one instant a blush of delight would steal over her cheeks at the picture her fancy drew, and then it would as quickly fade.

"It was no love that had prompted him to speak. A man does not love in three days," she argued. "It was one of those moments which mother warned me of. I forgot my dignity for a time; I allowed him to think that I had sought him, and he took advantage of it. Did he not prove it afterwards? I pleased him for the minute, but gone out of his sight I was forgotten. Why—why cannot I tear him out of my heart now and for ever! Why do I let him torment me? We are not even on the same side of life—a chasm stretches between us. It is dishonour to myself to think of him. If he but knew, if he but guessed how great that thought is, how much amusement I should give him! But he must never know—I must bury my secret; I must—I will."

She rose, and began her dressing, as the door opened and Maggie came in, her hands full of flowers which she had brought for Vera.

Vera unloosed her magnificent tresses and let them fall over her face to hide the agitation her thoughts had traced on it; but Miss Delane chattered on briskly, not perceiving anything strange in the girl's quiet replies. She was used to Vera, and she was too deep in the subject of her dive to think twice about anything else.

The last performance of the operatic company went off splendidly. Mr. De Mortimer had good reason to thank his "lucky stars," according to his own vernacular for the Earl's patronage. Abbey Chester was just near enough for the inhabitants to be impressed by the fact that their greatest magnate of the county had seen the operas not once but several times, and the shillings flowed into the coffers of the management with a rapidity that astonished and delighted all the members of the company except Vera, whom De Mortimer took particular care should know little about the pecuniary success that she had been chiefly instrumental in bringing about.

As soon as the curtain fell Vera made her way to her dressing-room. She was just entering it, when loud footfalls sounded behind her, and, turning, she saw her father.

"Well, my dear," he said, in a peculiar tone, "you got on very well, very well, indeed. You can come back and star any day you like in Abbey Chester. That's the opinion of everybody in the place."

Vera waited for him to go on. She was not used to this manner; his geniality was too forced, and came too late in the day to be well-comes or believed in.

De Mortimer approached a few steps nearer.

"Not that you will want to star anywhere but in London for years to come, ah, Vera! You'll show them the real thing when once you are at the *Thespias*."

Vera trembled slightly.

"I am not going to the *Thespias*, father," she replied.

De Mortimer was silent, then he sighed heavily.

"Well, I can't say but that I'm bitterly disappointed. This is what I always looked forward to, you know, Vera; and what your mother would have sanctioned at once, I know."

Vera faced him slowly.

"How can you utter such a pitiful falsehood!" she almost whispered. "Mother sanction it! To say that, when I remember how she prayed you never to let me go even near a theatre."

"Your mother was a disappointed woman. At one time she had a big future before her, never so good as yours; but she went off terribly, got *passé* before you could say knife, and of course imagined the same fate awaited you on the boards."

"This of a dead woman who slaved and even starved herself to keep him in bread!" was the bitter, contemptuous thought in the girl's mind, but she said nothing.

"Then you are quite determined, Vera?" observed her father, breaking the silence.

"I am quite determined," she replied, firmly.

"You are a foolish girl, and don't know which side your bread is buttered," was Mr. De Mortimer's parting remark as he turned away.

"But by Heaven, I do," he muttered to himself, as he strode down the narrow passage, "and so shall you, miss, before I am very much older."

"I met Nathaniel outside, looking as black as thunder; what's the matter?" asked Maggie, as she ran into the dressing-room.

"He has been trying pleasantly to make me alter my mind about the London engagement."

"Pleasantly!" echoed Miss Delane, with a derisive laugh. "Why, Vera, you must have conjured up some vision of your own. Whoever heard of Nathaniel De Mortimer being pleasant. Upon my word, I prefer an oath to a smile from him, for the latter is not a pretty thing."

Vera shuddered—why she could not tell—and the subject was dropped.

"Are you quite sure you won't be lonely?" cried Maggie, as she prepared to start with Mr. Motte the next morning.

"Quite sure. I am going into another world altogether. See!"

And Vera held up the acting edition of "Romeo and Juliet."

"A world of phials and daggers! Barely aniliving, is it, Wenty?"

"No, by Jove, no. I say, Maggie, can't we prevail on Miss Vera to come with us?"

Vera shook her head decidedly.

"No, Mr. Motte, you cannot. I have planned out a lovely day all to myself. I am going to try and imagine myself Juliet for once. It is true I have no Romeo, but I must throw a cloak over this chair, and it will do equally as well."

And Vera showed all her pretty teeth in the smile that came over her face.

"Well, every one to their taste. Take care of yourself; don't do all the packing. It is not fair. Good-bye, dear."

"Good-bye, Maggie. I wish you a happy day, dear. I am sure you will have it."

Vera stood at the window and watched the girl's tall, handsome figure, with the man bending towards her with lover-like anxiety, till they had vanished.

"Yes, they are happy," she said to herself; "they have a lifetime before them, visions of happiness such as I can scarcely understand. Well," she sighed, half brokenly, "if it is not to be my lot here this cannot last for ever. There is an end—the end that mother seemed to welcome.

"Then star nor sun shall waken,
Nor any change of light;
Nor sound of waters shaken,
Nor any sound or sight;
Nor wintry leaves nor veran,
Nor days nor things diurnal;
Only the sleep eternal;
In an eternal night."

"Eternal night! How does it sound? Peaceful yet lonely, and I have had so little day. Well, vain wishing and regret will not bring me

sunshine. If Fate has decreed it is not to come it will not come."

She turned from the window with this philosophic ending to her thoughts, and, opening her book, began to walk slowly to and fro, counting the lines of Juliet's part, and gradually losing herself in the identity of this imaginary girl.

The morning slipped away, and found her still at her imposed task. After her simple meal she determined to go out, perhaps join some afternoon service. In her mother's lifetime this was a habit she never missed; but her intention was frustrated by the laudatory coming to her and asking her if she would be afraid to stay in the house alone, save for the small handmaiden, just for an hour.

Courteous and kind as ever, Vera put aside her own inclinations, and agreed at once; and drawing up an armchair to the fire, she determined to make herself as comfortable as she could.

The grey afternoon soon faded into the dusk of a wintry evening. Vera was deeply thought-gazing at the glowing coals, picturing visions, which at one moment brought a gleam of passing happiness to her face, at the next a contraction of pain, when she heard the outer door-bell ring, and the servant go along the passage.

With an unconscious sense of coming vexation, Vera half turned as the door of the room was opened and her father lurched in—from his flushed appearance she saw with horror already well intoxicated.

He laughed as he threw his hat on the table, and met the girl's nervous glance.

"Not—not the most welcome guest, eh, my dear daughter!" began De Mortimer, falling into a chair heavily, and dragging it towards the fire.

Vera's hands crept up to her heart. She felt frightened. This was no usual thing. Her father never came near her.

"Do you want anything?" she managed to ask, though her voice trembled.

"Do I want anything?" repeated De Mortimer with a growl. "Yes, I do, or I shouldn't be here if I didn't."

Vera waited for him to go on, but he sat staring stupidly into the fire; the warm atmosphere of the room made him sleepy, his eyes half closed. Vera's heart beat.

"If he would drop off to sleep," she thought, hurriedly, "I could steal away, and be safe till Maggie or Mrs. Brown comes."

But even while this hope was born it died. Nathaniel opened his eyes, shook himself, and was once again wide awake.

"Don't stand there like a dummy," he snarled.

"Go and get me some brandy!"

"We have none," she answered, a great disgust and loathing welling up in her breast for this man whom she must call her father.

"The spit of your mother, the devil take you!" growled Nathaniel, staggering to his feet. "Like black was white, that you would! What's this, eh?"

He lifted a bottle standing on the sideboard.

"That's not mine; it is Miss Delane's," Vera spoke quickly and coldly.

"Champagne!" muttered De Mortimer, as the firelight shone on the gilt top. "Well, if you have nothing better this will do."

And drawing a glass from the table also he coolly smashed the neck of the bottle against the fireplaces and poured the bubbling wine into the glass full to the brim.

"Here's to your health," he said mockingly, "and good luck for the future."

He drained the wine to the last drop; though to a strong man in ordinary circumstances such a draught would have had little effect, in De Mortimer's already half-drunk state it was the last fuel to the flame that ran in his veins.

"Bah!" he cried, thickly, throwing the glass recklessly to swell the ruins of the bottle in the fender. "Call that wine! Give me something with body in it—ngh! I must go and get some brandy to take the taste out of my mouth. So let's get our business over as soon as you like. Fetch a pen and ink."

He fumbled in his breast-pocket, and produced a long, folded paper as he spoke.

"What for?" was formed rather than uttered by Vera's white lips.

"To sign your name to this. Come, look sharp!"

"What is it?" again asked the girl.

"It's Robinson's engagement. You know that well enough. Come now, d—n you, I've no time to waste!"

"Father, I have told you three times I will not sign this paper nor take the engagement, and I cannot alter my words."

"Cannot," snarled the man, glaring up at her pale, lovely face, "will not, you mean, you cursed piece of obstinacy! Come, I'm in no mood to be trifled with. Get the pen, I say. Do you hear me?"

Vera gazed at him silently for an instant. Common sense whispered in one ear, "Sign, sign. What worse is this engagement than your present life? Don't rouse him;" but pride, honour, contempt, and, last of all, the memory of her mother's words, urged her to make a stand now.

A ghastly future would be before her if she submitted to this unfatherly tyranny. She was but the means whereby Nathaniel hoped to draw in gold in which to make a beast of himself. Degradation and endless misery would be the end if she yielded now. True, her present life was bad, but it could not approach the other.

"I do hear you," she said, as calmly as she could; "but what I told you last night I repeat again—I cannot accept this offer. I will not!"

Nathaniel muttered an oath. He spread the paper out on the table, with his strong hands shaking from drink and rage.

"And I say you shall!" he hissed.

"Are you my father?" the girl cried, suddenly. "Are you so debased that you push me on to a precipice beneath which lies a sink of shame and iniquity, which you know I should never approach? No, you are not my father—you cannot be! You are a bully! a coward! a liar! a murderer! for you killed my mother by your brutal cruelty and neglect! Shame on you! I have obeyed you hitherto as a child should who honours its parent, but from this day forth I renounce all obedience to you! I cut myself adrift from you, as I tear this paper."

And gathering up the foolscap Vera tore it deliberately into pieces, and threw them into the fire.

De Mortimer stood transfixed by the girl's sudden rage. When her voice ceased, and he saw her calm, cool determination—the destruction of the paper he thought to have forced her, cowed her, to sign—the full tide of his passion broke loose.

"D—n you!" he almost shrieked, gripping her arm in his strong hand, and glaring into her face; "you shall pay for this! You devil! You eat! Dafy me! We shall see. If you dare to speak as you have done once more I will kill you, and rid myself of you, you cursed prig you!"

With every syllable he shook the girl as though she had been a straw in his grasp, and then, as the flames licked up the torn paper, his passion culminated; he lifted his fist, and struck Vera a violent blow.

She gasped, reeled, tried to cry, to utter some sound, but her strength was exhausted, and she fell backwards against a chair, sliding from there to the ground in a dead faint.

The man glared down at her silent, prostrate form.

"Is she hurt?" he muttered, sobered a little. "D—n her! I hope she is; it will teach her a lesson. I didn't touch her face."

He stood down and gasped anxiously at the still countenance—so white yet lovely. It was not on her account he feared suddenly, he was afraid he might have injured her beauty and so himself.

"No, not a scratch! Lie there, my child. I don't think you will dafy me again in a hurry!"

He grasped his hat and lurched from the room, first glancing back when at the door to look once again at the slender silent form, with the firelight tenderly touching the sweet still face as though giving mute sympathy to it. He growled another oath, shut the door, and left the house.

"Oh, dear! how tired I am! Wenty, I do

hope Vera is not quite worn out with her long day!"

"It is just seven o'clock. We will have a nice dinner together, and cheer her up. Do you know, Maggie, I feel quite wretched about her! Yes, by Jove! I do!"

"And so do I. Well, I mean to do something! Vera shall not stay with that brute if I can prevent it in any way. Here we are. Give me the flowers. How pleased she will be to see them, and, better still, to know that I made a good impression. Oh, Wenty! you have no idea what an angel she is!"

"No, by Jove! I haven't!" replied Mr. Motts, gazing affectionately at his pretty fiancee, "when you are here."

"Rubbish!"

Miss Delane rang the bell sharply as she spoke.

The landlady opened the door, but Maggie ran past her into the sitting-room.

"Vera! Vera!" she called.

There was no answer.

"If you please, miss, Martha told me Miss Vera had gone out."

"Gone out!" repeated Miss Delane in surprise. "Why, wherever— Oh, Wenty! something has happened!"

Mr. Motts produced a match and lit the gas, and Miss Delane let her eyes wander round the room. She caught sight of the broken fragment of glass in the fender and a note on the table almost at the same minute.

She seized this and opened it hurriedly.

A small heart-shaped locket fell out. She had never seen it removed from Vera's white throat before.

The lines were few and curt,—

"It is the end at last, dearest friend; I can bear no more! He came to-day, and tried to force me to sign the engagement for the Thespia. When I refused he struck me down! I fainted, but am better now. Maggie, I am gone from him, I hope for ever! Forgive me for leaving you without a word. Words could never express all I feel for you, dear. Heaven grant you every happiness! If we do not meet again, think of me sometimes. I leave you my darling mother's locket towards my share of expenses. I have kept three sovereigns for my wants. Don't fret about me; remember how I have suffered; with freedom I must be happier. Heaven bless you, dear—VERA."

"Gone! Gone!" cried Maggie, and, falling forward on the table, she burst into tears.

CHAPTER XIV.

LATE as had been the hour of his returning, Rex Darnley was down early on the morning following the masked ball.

He wandered through the large rooms, deserted save for himself and the well-organised servants, who, despite their labours of the previous night, were all at their posts.

"Are they wound up like machinery, I wonder," Rex smiled to himself as he unfolded a morning paper and prepared for a plunge into politics. "It seems like it."

He was half way through his breakfast when Sir Keith came in, looking wonderfully handsome, with a glow of unrestrained happiness in his eyes.

"Ah! Darnley," he said, warmly, as the two men shook hands, "this is jolly. I thought no one was up yet but myself."

"I never stay in bed after eight-thirty at the latest," was Rex's remark.

"I have my hands full, as you may imagine. By the bye, Rex, old fellow, you have not congratulated me yet."

"Wait on!" asked Darnley, drily.

Sir Keith coloured and laughed.

"Of course, I forgot everybody is not myself. There is only one thing in my mind at the present moment. I hope I don't look too great a fool, but I assure you, old fellow, I can scarcely

restrain myself from shouting aloud in sheer happiness!"

"Oh! I understand now."

Rex cut his partridge quietly. It went dead against him to see this bright, honest, true young man fall a victim to the machinations of his artful, selfish cousin. He could not bring his lips to utter the falsehood of congratulation, so he remarked,—

"You know you have my most earnest—my sincerest—wishes for your future happiness, Moreton; you deserve every good you may get."

Sir Keith laughed as he attacked his breakfast.

"Thanks, old man. I am not afraid of the future with you."

Rex sighed impatiently; he longed to speak out, to open this most infatuated lover's eyes, to let him see upon what an edge of a treacherous abyss he was standing, to tell him of the countless coquettices of Lady Anice, but his manhood, his sense of honour, stopped him. He could not blacken anybody's character willingly, and he did not care to be the one to break Sir Keith's dream of happiness in this its very infancy, so he changed the conversation.

"Who was that dark, foreign-looking woman with a pretty daughter who was here last night?"

Sir Keith shook his head.

"I have not the least idea. To tell you the honest truth, heaps of people came whom I had never seen or heard of before; a great many were George's friends."

"Oh! this lady was no friend of Druce's. I overheard her discussing you as though she were most intimately connected with you."

Sir Keith looked intensely surprised.

"This is most interesting. A dark, foreign lady, sounds like a romance; mantillas, flashing eyes, daggers—" he stopped short suddenly in his laughing speech, and his face changed as he asked hurriedly,—

"Did you catch her name by any chance, Rex?"

"Something like the Comtesse de Ganyani."

Sir Keith's brow was clouded.

"Yes, it is the same."

Darnley looked up in momentary surprise at the bitterness in the tone, and as Sir Keith met his gaze, he added,—

"This woman wrecked my young life, Darnley. I have cause to dislike the very mention of her. She was my father's second wife, the woman he elected to fill my dead mother's place to myself and my sister."

"I am awfully sorry, dear old fellow," began Rex, "that I—"

Sir Keith held out his hand at once.

"You are a true friend, Darnley. I like to speak of this to you, though as a rule I never go back to the past. I have only spoken of it to one other."

He meant Lady Anice.

"Anything you tell me, Moreton, is as safe as in your own breast," Rex replied.

"I am sure of it. The very thought of this woman daring to make her way into my house angers me beyond telling. Someone must have brought her unknowingly."

There was a moment's pause, and then the young man said, with a sigh,—

"How all my boyish misery comes back when I think of her. You know, Rex, our mother died soon after my sister Madeline—Madge, as we always called her—was born. I was young, but not too young to remember her beauty and sweetness. My father, I know now, must have been a very weak man, his grief at my mother's death was excessive, yet"—there was a touch of bitterness in Sir Keith's voice—"yet scarcely three years after her death he brought another mistress to Moreton Hall!"

"Wait on!" asked Darnley, drily.

Sir Keith coloured and laughed.

"Of course, I forgot everybody is not myself. There is only one thing in my mind at the present moment. I hope I don't look too great a fool, but I assure you, old fellow, I can scarcely

sound of this woman's voice. I alone was left to guard my sister."

"The servants, old retainers, who had been in my father's service for years, were dismissed, and an insolent crew engaged in their stead. It was useless appealing to my father; he seemed bewildered, stunned by his wife's extraordinary ways, though he was still enthralled by her beauty.

"She hated both children, and was too spiteful to conceal that hate. From me she got nothing but contempt, perhaps boyish insolence; but she knew I was no coward, that threats of violence and ill-treatment were thrown away on me, so she had recourse to the refinement of cruelty, and wreaked her dislikes and revenge on Madge when I was studying with a tutor, and could not be always with my darling.

"Oh! Rex, you cannot conceive how sweet a child she was, and how she used to cling to me, her only friend and protector! We loved one another with no ordinary love."

"It came to my knowledge at last of the misery Madge had to bear. She was thrashed, locked in dark rooms, and left in the hands of a coarse woman, who took delight in tormenting the nervous fancies of the child; and I determined, in my young impetuosity, that it should end.

"I spoke to my father openly; I told him all. I appealed to him, in the name of our dead mother. She came in while I was pleading. There was a terrible scene, in which my father seemed powerless to take part; and at last, infuriated past all reason, the woman seized a horsewhip, swearing she would thrash Madge till she could not stand.

"I rushed from the room, Rex, dragged my sister from her darkened nursery, and put her through a window, whispering her to run quickly to one of the lodges, where the only remaining servant of the family lived. Madge knew she was sensible; she kissed me, and stole away in the darkness like a little white ghost. All I remember after that was Lady Moreton rushing in. I was struck a heavy blow.

"I must have fainted, for when I opened my eyes Nurse Rowley, the woman to whom I had sent Madge, was leaning over me, and all was still. Little by little I grasped the meaning of the words they spoke—my father was dead. The excitement, the horror, the agitation I had awakened in his breast, added to by the spectacle of his wife's mad rage, produced a fit of apoplexy, which killed him.

"My trustees were immediately on the spot, and the widow was forced to leave the home she had desecrated. As soon as I could speak I turned to Nurse Rowley, and gasped out Madge's name. She knew nothing of her; the child had never reached her house, and from that day to this she has been lost!"

"Lost!" repeated Rex, who had listened to the quick recital with intense interest.

"Yes; we searched everywhere, but no trace could we find. We even dragged the lake—"he shuddered—"but nothing was discovered. Rex, I know such sentiments are old-fashioned nowadays that brotherly love is laughed at, but the truth remains. My boyhood vanished, I had but one motive in my life to find Madge, the precious legacy of my dead mother—try by every aid in my power to make the rest of her existence as happy as mortals can be, to root out all the memories of the horrors she had been called upon to bear, but it was not to be. Though year after year my lawyers, my trustees, I myself, have searched and searched, we have never been successful. Once I thought my mission was ended; a girl was traced, my hopes were raised. I travelled to America, only to find my journey had been vain."

Sir Keith sighed, and then said slowly,—

"I have seen many, many faces that recalled something of Madge in their lineaments, but never until the other day did I come across one that for the moment blotted out all the years that have passed, and seemed my baby sister in reality before me. I think you saw her—of course you did."

"You mean—" quelled Rex.



DE MORTIMER SEIZED HIS HAT AND LURCHED FROM THE ROOM.

"The young actress of the company that was in Bentley last week."

"Miss De Mortimer?"

Rex's voice sounded almost strained.

"Yes; Vera she was called; the daughter of that terrible looking man."

"This is strange!" Rex rose as he spoke. "From the first I doubted that relationship, and now—"

"Now you must doubt it still. Dear old fellow, I never let a chance slip. I have already had all sorts of inquiries made, and there is proof, also, that she is his child. It seems her mother was eminently superior to De Mortimer—a sweet, refined, delicate woman, whose memory is highly respected in the profession which she once adorned."

Rex was silent.

Vera's lovely face was before him. Despite all his efforts he could not rid his mind of her, or efface the recollection of her sweetness, and now, as Keith ceased speaking, the thought of her birth being equal to his own was but the realisation of the one that had come to him the first moment he saw her. It grew stronger and stronger till it forced itself into words, and, turning, he said,—

"Moretoun, something tells me that these proofs you speak of are not real. I feel certain that the girl was not born in that sphere, nor is she the child of that bally, that low vulgar scoundrel. Yes, I am sure of it."

Sir Keith sprang up and grasped the other's hand.

"Rex, you give me new hope. If only it might be so—if only—Ah! dear old fellow, you put the final touches to my happiness."

"Let me help you. I—should like to take the ease up. She interested me."

How cold the sentence sounded.

Interested him! He, who till now had laughed at love as at a folly, to be filled with a passion of love for this girl whom he had known only a short week. It was incredible. It was a joy to him to work on her account, he told himself,

though hope was dead for him—though her heart was given to Tom Watson; yet nevertheless, he could struggle to give her position. If it were but true! If his presentiments were but verified! His eyes glowed as he pictured himself instrumental in taking her from the life she detested, and placing her in a home with love, luxury, beauty, all at her feet.

"You will do this," cried Sir Keith Moretoun, his face flushed with excitement. "Rex, I have no words to thank you. How Anice will rejoice if—if, I scarcely dare breathe a fresh hope to myself, last it should be only another disappointment."

"Anice!" thought Rex to himself. "Poor Keith! How I should like to warn you to open your eyes—but—"

The two men were silent for a time, and then Sir Keith said,—

"I shall make investigations and find out the whereabouts of the Comtesse de Ganyani. She must be staying in the neighbourhood."

"How does she come by such a title?"

Sir Keith laughed contemptuously.

"I heard through my lawyers that, after my father's death, she went abroad, posed as a rich widow, and caught some penniless foreigner with a title as long as a yard. Poor wretch! he too, is dead. The girl you speak of must be his child."

"She was a handsome young creature," remarked Rex, "with eyes as black as a sloe."

"Like her mother's." Sir Keith shivered as at a remembrance of horror. "Well, she has no boy to deal with now. I shall resent any overtures or intrusions with bitterness. I would not let such a woman even approach Anice. Her pure young nature would be contaminated by the presence of such a creature."

The conversation was broken by the entrance of the Earl and Tom Watson.

Rex looked at the latter, seeing and admiring the statuque face, yet forced against himself to read the weakness, the self-indulgence so plainly written on it.

"When do you begin your duties, Watson?" he asked, after a while.

Anny's brother looked up hurriedly.

"Some day next week, I believe," he replied.

"Has not Mr. Mason written to you?"

"Only once; he said in that letter that I was to do nothing till I heard from him again."

"I hope you will get on with Mason—he is essentially business-like, and if you suit him he told me your income would probably become larger shortly."

Rex had dropped his voice to a confidential whisper. He had a natural delicacy of thought for the young man, and would not discuss his affairs too openly.

"Oh! I expect I shall get on all right," Tom answered, somewhat carelessly. "The duties of a private secretary can't be very heavy."

Rex's brows met for an instant.

"You have not tried them yet, Watson; be advised by me—don't enter upon your new life with those ideas."

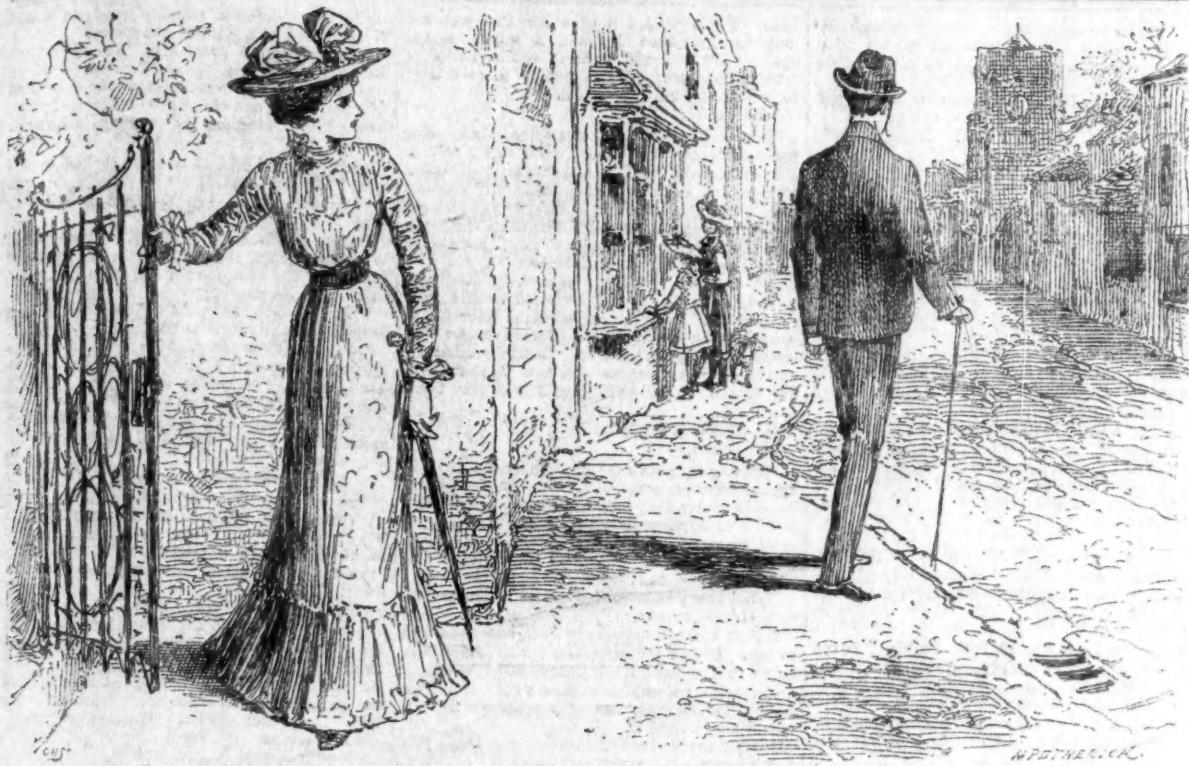
He walked away slowly.

Tom Watson took up the paper a little impatiently.

"Rex Darnley is a good man, but he has no sympathies," was his vein of thought. "Why should Fate have made me a poor man, compelled to be at the beck and call of a master? How I wish I possessed a fortune! not for my own sake alone, but for my mother's and Anny's!"

(To be continued.)

SEVANTS in Germany have their "character books" duly stamped by the police, and in these are written full particulars of their conduct when in service. The employer keeps the book until the servant leaves, when it is handed over, after an account of the servant's behaviour and the reason for leaving have been entered.



MEG TURNED TO TAKE A SECOND LOOK, FOR STRANGERS WERE RARE IN THOSE PARTS.

H. P. THOMAS.

VERNON'S DESTINY.

CHAPTER XIV.

THERE are some women, who, though they may go through their lives without a thought of matrimony; who, though they may never have a prospect of being wives and having children of their own, are yet born with the instinct of maternity, who love all children as a matter of course, and show oftentimes more truly a mother's heart towards the little unconscious one than her who bore them.

Meg Charters had never had a lover. She was looked upon as a "born" old maid. From earliest girlhood she had seemed marked out for a single life; and yet, as she sat in Nurse Edwards's best parlour, with the little nameless child in her arms, mother-love shone in her eyes; and no baby born in the purple could have been tended more delicately than was this daughter of an unknown waltz by the Honourable Miss Charters.

Lady Maude came in presently, a look of un-wanted anxiety on her calm, sweet face.

"I cannot make it out, Meg. Dr. Williams has the gravest fears for her life. She is quite conscious, and I have implored her to tell me the name of her friends, that I may send for them, but she only shakes her head!"

"What does the doctor think?"

"My dear child, he is as puzz'ed as I am. Her clothes are of the poorest description, and worn almost to rags; but she has every appearance of gentle birth, and her little hands are white and delicate as snowflakes, and so thin that her wedding-ring almost drops off her finger!"

Lady Maude had been much relieved to perceive that wedding-ring. Gentle and kind by nature, she must have helped the unhappy stranger under any circumstances; but she did it far more freely after she had seen the plain, golden circles which to her mind was the sign-manual of the waltz's respectability.

"Is she a widow?" hazarded Meg. "I should think she must have married against the wishes of her parents, and lost her husband!"

"He must be dead!" decided Lady Maude. "No man could let such a beautiful, young wife go roaming about the world alone!"

"Has she asked for the child?"

"No! Only when he told her it was a girl she just murmured, 'Thank Heaven,' I think. Those are the only words she has spoken."

"I should like to see her."

"You can go in, but you must be very careful, Meg, not to excite her. Any agitation might be fatal to her, the doctor says."

Meg waited for no second permission, but stole quietly into the sick-room. She had thought the stranger beautiful the day before in her shabby garb of musty black; she deemed her lovely now, as she lay on the white lavender-scented bed, wrapped in one of Lady Maude's own garments of fine cambric trimmed with delicate Indian embroidery.

The hard despair was gone, too, from her face. Yesterday she had seemed a woman; to-day she looked a child as pure and innocent as the infant in the next room; her hair hung round her like a golden veil, and her blue eyes shone like stars.

Meg went up to her and took her hand. Then, on a sudden impulse, she bent over her and kissed her brow. The girl flushed crimson.

"You should not have done that!" she whispered; "no one kisses me now."

It seemed to Meg the saddest speech ever made, but she would not answer it. She only drew a chair a little nearer to the bed, and sat down.

"I have come to stop with you a little while. May I talk to you?"

"I cannot talk much, I am so tired"—she passed one hand across her brow—"and it all seems so wonderful."

"It must seem strange to be with us whom you never saw until yesterday, but we will take

great care of you. Won't you tell us what to call you?"

The girl hesitated.

"I would like to tell you, but I am afraid, You see we might hear of it, and find me."

"Do you mean your father?"

"Oh, no! my father is in Heaven. Do you think if he had been alive he would not have protected me?"

Meg soothed her gently.

"And you have no mother?"

"No; nor sister nor brother."

"Then you are quite alone!"

"Oh, no! I wish I were! If I were alone I should be safe, and not have to creep about like some miserable guilty thing. Don't you understand?" and the blue eyes turned yearningly to Meg. "I am always hiding myself from him. I dare not make a friend, I dare not have a resting-place. I must go moving on; I must always be in concealment!"

"But why?"

"He would find me," and the blue eyes dilated with terror. "He vowed I should not escape him! He said—oh! bend your head close, and let me whisper." Then, as Meg obeyed, she breathed in faint, panting accents, "He said he would shut me up in a madhouse; and if there was no other way of bringing me to reason he would put me away in some asylum where I should never be heard of from year's end to year's end!"

Meg wiped the great beads of perspiration from her brow tenderly—all how tenderly!—but even yet she had no idea of the extent of her poor friend's misery.

"But surely your husband had relations if you had none? Could not his family protect you against this enemy?"

"What enemy?"

Was she wandering? Could the strange story be only an hallucination of a disordered brain? Meg wondered vaguely.

"The man whom you dread so much—who threatened to shut you up!"

"Yes, he is my enemy. I never thought to call him so; of course he is my enemy. But then, you see, he has the law on his side; he said so."

"But how? If he is neither your father nor mother, what power can he have over you?"

The answer well-nigh took Meg's breath away.

"He is my husband."

"Your husband?"

"I could not help it," said the girl, fancying the intense surprise was meant as blame. "Indeed, indeed, I could not. I had been deceived; I had estranged my best friend, and he said I could never hold up my head again unless we were married. I thought he would be kind to me, and I was half beside myself with terror, and so I consented!"

"You poor child!"

Even then she did not connect the story with one she had often heard—even now she had not the slightest suspicion of the truth.

"I like to hear you call me that. It reminds me of the old days when I was a happy, careless schoolgirl. My favourite friend always called me 'child,' though she was younger than I!"

"Couldn't you write to her?"

"I dare not!"

"Why?"

"She is a young lady!" bitterly. "She has been presented at Court, and gone through the London season. Do you think her people would let her speak to me?"

"Why not?"

"Because I am not of their world. I never was, you know, quite; but now, only in the last six months, I have been a wanderer from everything good and pleasant. I have wanted everything but sorrow—done everything but ask alms; and when that lady found me, I was on my way to that!"

"You were going to Charteris Hall?"

"Yes. I had heard the old lord who lived there was good to soldiers. I thought he would befriend a soldier's child. My father had been to India; had served in the same regiment as Colonel Charteris. I thought, just for old sake's sake, he would have pity on me. I tell you I had reached the lowest stage of distress—I was going to beg!"

"And now you will trust us, my aunt and I. We are both Charteris'. I had two uncles soldiers; my aunt is the widow of one. Be sure we will do our best for you. You shall stay with us until you are strong and well; and before you go Aunt Maude will think of some plan for your future life, which will help you from your husband's tyranny."

"Then you trust me!"

"Yes."

"Without knowing my name?"

"We would rather have known your name, because we feel your friends might be anxious about you; but if, indeed, you are friendless, it is no matter."

"I wish I could tell you, but I dare not."

"Never mind," said Meg, soothingly. "Do not fret about it, dear."

"I must. Oh! Miss Charteris, I am not twenty-one yet; and think what a wreck I have made of my life!"

"May I ask you something? It is nothing that will tell me even your name. Is there no hope of a reconciliation between you and your husband?"

"None."

"You are so young," pleaded Meg; "so young and helpless to roam the world like this! And the baby will want her father."

The girl turned round with fever-bright eyes, and two pink spots burning in her cheeks.

"I love my child," she said, eagerly, "as those do who have nothing else on earth to love; but I would rather fling her into the river and watch her drown than that the man who calls himself my husband should know of her existence."

"I see! Forgive me; I had no idea he had been so cruel to you as that! I thought perhaps, you both quarrelled, and parted in anger."

"I left him on my wedding-day, before I had worn his ring twelve hours. I knew him for what he was, but he found me out and forced me

back. For a week I lived a life that was one long torture; then I found a way to escape again. What I had suffered made me more cautious, or perhaps I was getting more crafty, for this time I have been safe."

"Poor child!"

"Safe!" said the wail, feverishly. "Ah, lady, you don't know what that word means to me. For almost seven months I have wandered about a homeless exile. I have had the coarsest food, the roughest lodging. Many a night I have slept out in the open fields with only Heaven's blue sky for canopy; many a day I have gone from morn to night without even a crust of bread, and yet I never repented. I might be wearing silks and jewels, the child in the next room might have a nursery and attendants worthy a princess, and yet I have never for one instant regretted my course. In all my misery I never laid down to rest nor, rose in the morning without a thanksgiving I was free from him."

"I wonder it has not killed you!"

She sighed.

"Sorrow does not kill, Miss Charteris, or if it does it takes years to do its work. Heaven knows I would gladly die; but for the thought of the child I would often have taken my life. I prayed—ah, Heaven! how I prayed!—that I and it might die together at its birth; but you see my prayer was left unanswered."

"And now you must live for her. You would not wish to leave her?"

"No; I must strive to protect her from her father. It was for my child's sake that I was going to the old Lord Charteris. I have my pride left. I should not have asked alms for myself, but for the sake of my unborn child I would have done it."

"My father is Lord Charteris now. Don't you think you can tell your story to him?"

"Oh, no!"

"Then you will trust yourself to my aunt and me! We will pledge our word never to say a word that would reveal your story. If only you will stay here—at least, until you are strong and well."

"And you will never ask me questions I dare not answer?"

"You shall tell us what you like, and leave the rest untold."

"I wonder why you are so good to me!"

"My dear, we are only treating you with common kindness. To whom should a woman look for sympathy if not to her sister-women!"

"But it was a woman who betrayed me! But for her I should now be a happy, careless girl! My husband was cruel enough to me, but he would never have blighted my life without her aid."

"One thing surprised us. It was my sister-in-law who found you—Mrs. Charteris. She used to be Lena Travers, and when we mentioned the name, it seemed to excite you strangely. It is so dear and good, I can't think she ever did anything to harm you—indeed, she has had a very sad life. Her parents were very poor, and I fear, not too honest. Her elder sister, Mrs. Merton, treated her like dirt; and I fancy, till she knew my brother, Lena had no one to love or care for her."

"I never saw Miss Travers in my life," said the invalid; "but my husband used to visit the family when they lived abroad, and so the name of Travers strikes terror to my soul."

"No wonder."

"You will not tell her!"

"Lena! Certainly not. That is why we have brought you here, at home, as my brother Nell is the only doctor in the place. He must have gleaned something of your story. Rest here; you will be quite safe. Dear old nurse never betrayed anyone in her life, and aunty and I are staid people, and can keep a secret well."

"Will you thank her for me, please? Don't let her think me ungrateful."

When Lady Maude heard all Meg had to tell she looked unusually thoughtful.

"I always thought the marriage laws wanted reforming, Meg!" she said, gravely.

"All husbands can't be so good as your poor

uncle, and it seems to me once married a woman is completely at her husband's mercy."

Meg had private suspicions. She should not have regarded her Uncle Tom as a model husband, but his widow evidently considered him perfect, and the niece was far too tender-hearted to wound her by seeming to question the fact.

"I hope all husbands are not so bad as this one!" she said, slowly; "but aunty, do you really mean he could compel her to return to him?"

"I am afraid he could. He is evidently a rich man, and could support her in comfort. I believe if the case were tried, in law he could insist upon her return."

"But if she refused? Women can't be dragged about by force nowadays!"

"She could be dragged back to him by a power stronger than force! He could claim the child; and I feel pretty sure where the little one went the mother would gladly follow."

"But I thought children belonged to their mothers for a long while! At any rate, until they are seven years old!"

"I believe they do, generally, but just think of the position. She—(by the way, Meg, I wish she would let us call her something, even if it is not her true name; to say 'she' perpetually is so perplexing)—is penniless, her utmost efforts could not command more than the scantiest food for the child! Its father is rich, and by her own showing could bring it up in luxury. If the babe's future home rested between living with a father, who would give it a spacious nursery, with trained attendants, and a mother who could provide at best a humble lodging and such care as she could spare from her daily toil, I don't think the law would hesitate long."

"It is a cruel injustice."

"I wonder what he has done?"

"The husband!"

"Yes. Clearly he has been cruel to her, but yet she makes no specific charge against him. I am afraid Lena's family know so many queer young men that it would be useless to try to find her out by their assistance."

"I would not try. I think it would simply kill her if she discovered it."

"What a sweet face she has!"

"And the child too!"

"By the way, Meg, the Doctor seems to think it should be christened, being premature; she is very delicate. You must try and get the mother to fix on a name without making her anxious. Tell her it is a mere precaution."

Meg found the task easier than she had expected.

"I shall be glad to have it done. As soon as I am better we must 'move on'; and in the wandering life I shall have to lead to arrange a christening would be a great difficulty."

"And you have thought of a name?"

The young mother hesitated.

"I should like it to be Hyacinth!"

"Hyacinth! That is a lovely name. Is it your own?"

"Oh, no! But I have thought a great deal of the flower lately. It has been oddly mixed up in my life, and I should like my little child to be called Hyacinth!"

"And what else?"

She grew white almost to her lips.

"There must be some other name, dear!" said Meg, who plied her intensely. "The baby must be described as the daughter of someone! You need not give your husband's name; the one you bore before your marriage would be quite sufficient."

She shook her head.

"It might give him a clue. My mother's name was Clifford; I am sure she would lend it to me!"

"And—forgive me—may we call you Mrs. Clifford—*aunt* and I?"

"Willingly. But would you not say 'Pearl'?" It was a foolish fancy; but there were just six of us elder girls at school, and we gave each other pet names after six precious stones. These were Ruby and Coral, Pearl and Turquoise, Emerald and Sapphire. I was Pearl. I have

him completely as a cousin, but is so incensed against his wife that he will not hear her name mentioned."

"It sounds incredible!"

"It's true! Nell is too good! He believes in people too readily. Actually, Meg, he accused me of an uncharitable spirit because I cannot be friendly to Mr. Denzil! He said the poor fellow had suffered enough at the hands of his kinswoman and mine! I grant Isola treated him badly, but I feel pretty sure Nell has not, Meg! I can't believe the story they tell of her which Mr. Denzil repeats so glibly, and my poor Nell was taken in so simply. I believe that Nell Charters—to call her by her old name—is shut up under the guardianship of that woman, and that her husband persecutes her. So far from not being willing to see us I believe he keeps her away from any living creature who could pity or cherish her; and, Meg, I don't mean to sit by and see it!"

"But—my dear!" said Meg, who was of the long-suffering rather than defensive order of women, "how will you prevent it?"

"I don't care! I won't have my husband made to seem as bad as Reginald Denzil. Denzil's very name is a byword for scorn. I won't have Nell's the same! He is so good and easy-going. He will be made a tool of completely if I let him!"

"He would never assist Mr. Denzil in any design against his wife!"

"He is assisting him now!"

"How?"

"By his countenance! Since he was received here, every house in the neighbourhood is open to him, and everywhere he tells the same tale. Oh! I can see it all. He is trying to worm himself into respectability, and take his place as a country gentleman. Then he will either have that poor thing shut up here, or sent her to some cheap place where she can be boarded out while he enjoys her money!"

"Lit, this is horrible!"

"I am sure it is true!"

"You are so imaginative! You write novels till you are always on the watch for romances in real life!"

Lil turned to her pitifully.

"Don't you believe me, Meg?"

"I think you believe every word you have told me, dear!"

"And don't you! Oo! Meg, you are my only hope. If you don't help me I shall have to give up in despair and let things go. Perhaps when the treatment of Nell Charters is public property, and my Nell's name is branded with infamy, you will be sorry you refused to help me!"

"My dear!" said Meg, soothingly, "I never refused to help you. I only asked what you wanted me to do!"

"I want to see Nell!"

"But she has refused to see you! She has treated you with insolence!"

"They say she has! Meg, do you remember Gay Vernon, who was in the accident with me? Do you know you called him the model of a perfect English gentleman. Well, your cousin Helen was his ideal of womanhood. Don't ask me how I know it. I do know it now. Say—could the girl Gay Vernon be the low, revengeful creature she is represented?"

"No!—but—"

"Leave out the but, Meg! Tell me in one word—will you help me?"

"Yes! but it is against my judgment!"

"Never mind your judgment!"

"And what is your first step, Lena. I suppose you have made some plan of action?"

"I have!"

"And the first step?"

"Don't laugh at me, Meg! It is too solemn. I mean to get into Charters Hall!"

(To be continued.)

THERE is a hospital for trees on the banks of the Seine in Paris. Trees which do not thrive on the boulevards are taken there to recover.

MARMION WOOD'S CLERK.

—101—

(Continued from page 249.)

"Let me put it on now, miss! just to see how it becomes you. Dear! dear! how beautiful it is, and how Mr. Wood would like to see you now!"

"Fine feathers make fine birds," I said, laughing; but pleased with my own reflection. I am afraid much flattery was making me quite vain. Then I turned to Walter's note, which was brief.

"DEAR MISS STRETTON (perhaps I ought to say sister).—I wish you every joy, and hope Marmion will appreciate the prize he has won. I should have liked to come over for the ceremony, but I was not asked, and will not intrude. Trusting that my little gift may find favour.—Believe me, dear Miss Stretton, yours,

"WALTER."

The next day dawned fair and bright, and quite early the house was all astir. Franklin had begged to assist in my toilet, whilst a young French maid was told off to Hildred.

We both wore white satin with trains of lace, and our sole ornaments were the flowers in our hair and at our breasts.

Hildred had utterly declined to wear any jewels.

"No," she said, with a slight gesture of pride; "we won't have any false pretences. We are very simple people, and we prefer to owe all to our husbands and to let folks know that we owe it. After marriage, if you like, Dick, I will convert myself into a perambulating jeweller's shop to please you—but not before!"

There was a great company gathered in the old grey church that day, both gentle and simple. But I think neither Hildred nor I were conscious of much beside the fact that this hour would make us wholly our lovers'; and having perfect love for, and trust in them, we had no tears to shed.

It had been arranged that on our departure for Italy, mamma was to travel to Maxworth, there to wait our return at "The Swallows." And although Lady Charnwood begged her, almost pathetically, to stay, she firmly refused.

"You will be so lonely! you will be half dead of *ennui*," she said.

Mamma smiled.

"I think not! I shall find a great deal of work to do, and time will pass quickly. I must be at home to welcome my girl. And Marmion cannot spare more than three weeks from the factories; you see, unlike Dick, he is a business man."

So while we went upon our jaunt, mamma was superintending the Maxworth household; and I liked to think of her occupying the great, handsome rooms and making them more home-like.

We spent the happiest of times, and as day followed day, and I grew more to recognise the strength and nobility of my husband's nature, I could not sufficiently thank Heaven for my happy lot.

It was a wet night when we returned home; but the windows were ablaze with lights, and fires burned in all the rooms. Mamma met us in the hall, smiling through her tears, and behind her stood the servants in an imposing rank.

Marmion had a friendly word for each, and when he presented me as the new mistress, there was not a face but looked kindly at me, not a voice that did not give me welcome.

We settled down at once, and my only regret was that so many callers disturbed us, but Marmion laughed, and told me I must pay the penalty of beauty (beauty, indeed!) and rank.

How quickly the time slipped by! A new year had come upon us before I realised I was getting quite an old married woman, and one day

in early January, as mamma and I sat sewing, Marmion entered the room hastily and, for the first time since our marriage, his face was stern and moody.

"You have had bad news!" I said, quickly, making room for him beside me. "Tell me what has gone wrong."

"That boy was born to torment me," he answered impatiently, pushing the hair from his brow; "what on earth I am to do with him now I can't tell. Just read this letter from his tutor," and he thrust a foreign-looking epistle into my hand. "Read it out, Belle. I can't believe it yet," and I read:

"MY DEAR WOOD,—

"It is my painful duty to inform you of the egregious folly of which your brother has been guilty. For some time past, unknown to me, he has been in the habit of frequenting a tavern where a countrywoman of yours was employed as a barmaid; and such an influence did she obtain over him, that he offered her marriage, and, of course, was accepted. The ceremony took place last week. I learned the facts an hour ago, and I am now writing you. What is to be done? The young couple are occupying apartments at the tavern, and your brother is too scared by his own rashness to communicate with you. I believe the girl is perfectly honest and not illiterate, but of course in no way suited to her present position. With many regrets,

"Yours sincerely,

"MAX RODEN."

"Oh, Marmion!" I cried; "what a dreadful thing! What shall you do?"

"I suppose I must go to Heidelberg, although I am wanted here. Well! Walter has made his own bed; he must lie on it; but I must see what can be done, and to do that must first interview the bride. I wish you joy of your new sister," and then laughed, suddenly: "By Jove, Belle! how he has forgotten the traditions of his race! What a row there will be when his mother's people hear the truth!"

"I don't think you should laugh about the matter, Marmion; it probably means life-long misery to Walter, and she is doubtless an artful designing woman."

"Curious both brothers should fall victims to the same species of animal," he answered, wickedly; "but seriously, Belle, I must be off to-morrow; will you order my traps to be got ready?"

"Yes! and mine; I am going too."

"Oo! you can't little woman; I shall travel too fast for you."

"I am your wife, sir, and I'm going where you go to take care of you," I announced with mock dignity. "You are off to the land of sirens and fairies, and my presence will be a protection."

"What do you say to such a proposal, mother?" I questioned Marmion.

"That you had better grant it graciously, whilst you can; Belle is difficult to manage when thwarted."

"Ho! ho! How I sigh for the freedom of my bachelor days! Well, my small tyrant, make haste with your packing, and if in the hurry and flurry of the journey, I lose or mislay you, don't blame me; I am not a responsible party."

We reached Heidelberg without any special adventure, and having inquired the way to Walter's Tavern, as we called it, directed our steps thither.

The place looked clean and respectable; the landlord was the perfection of politeness.

Marmion was absent, but Mrs. Wood was in her apartments. Would we be good enough to follow him upstairs? and he preceded us apologising profusely for the darkness of the staircase.

He ushered us finally into a large, low room, where sat a woman reading.

She rose as we entered, and we saw she was tall, dark, handsome, and dressed stylishly in grey cashmere and mervelleux, and evidently Walter's senior by several years.

"I am Marmion Wood," my husband said, abruptly.

And she had the insolence to smilingly pat out her hand and say :

"How do you do, brother ! I suppose I have the pleasure of seeing young Mrs. Wood."

Even Marmion was staggered by her effrontery.

As for me, I had nothing to say. Walter's wife was evidently not a lady, but I was glad even to find no trace of vulgarity in her speech or bearing.

"You will pardon my plain speaking," said Marmion, frowning, "but you must know that my brother's marriage is a great mistake, and a source of great annoyance to me. As his guardian I have come over at great inconvenience to myself to see what can be done in the matter."

"It would be best, brother, to let well alone. We are legally married, and you cannot set aside that fact or rob me of my husband."

"That is not my intention, madam. He must bear the consequences of his folly ; although, indeed, I think you are most to blame. He is barely eighteen, and you are a woman of—"

"Twenty-eight," she said coolly. "But if he had not married me he might have done a great deal worse. I am honest, my birth is respectable, and I shall disagree neither you nor him."

"I hope it may prove so ; although I don't see what happiness can spring from a marriage which, on your side, at least, is purely mercenary ; and I warn you that my brother is as unstable as water."

"I know that ; but I can manage him. And as for being mercenary, I suppose I am ; but I have known nothing but poverty and hardship all my life. Was it wonderful I should clutch at a chance of happiness and ease ? I am only a woman, and I have had a hard fight with the world."

She paused, and looked wistfully at me. I liked her better in that moment of weakness, and I think Marmion was touched a little, for he said, not unkindly,—

"It is always my way to make the best of a bad bargain ; and I am here not to deny or ignore your claim upon my brother, but to make some suitable provision for you both."

She tried to thank him, but he stopped her hastily,—

"Walter will be a rich man when he attains his majority (no doubt he told you that), but at present his allowance is four hundred per annum. I will add to it another two ; and as I wish to have him near me, I insist that for the next three years you will occupy a small place of mine about twenty miles from Maxworth. If you or he refuse to accept my terms, I wash my hands of all responsibility."

"You are very generous," Mrs. Walter said. "We accept," and I smiled to think how very little she consulted Walter or his wishes.

He came in presently, looking scared and bewildered, and it was very evident that he was completely under his wife's control.

He made some slight show of resistance to Marmion's wishes and plans, but the lady broke in,—

"Don't be stupid, Wal, and quarrel with your bread and butter. Of course we shall do as your brother desires," and he said no more.

After all, Walter's marriage did not turn out the mistake we feared.

Eden Wood proved herself a capable woman, and ruled her husband firmly, not unkindly.

She saved him from many a folly and extravagance, and in no way attempted to thrust herself into our circle.

And when he at last attained his majority she bore her new honours well, and I believe, was rather popular in her set.

We were never exactly friends, but when we met it was on the pleasantest of terms.

One child only was born to them, a boy, curiously like Marmion in look and bearing, endowed, too, with his mother's firmness and capability. He is a great favourite with us.

As for Hildred and me, I wonder if on earth exists another pair of women so happy as we. There is a standing, amiable quarrel between us as to the

relative merits of our husbands, each maintaining her own is the "best man in all the world." And mamma listens smiling, with a grandchild on either side, two smaller ones at her feet, content in our happiness and love, ready to go when the call shall come, yet not eager to leave the hearts that love her, or the world which has proved so kind to her children.

[THE END.]

GIVE HIM BACK TO ME.

—10:—

CHAPTER IX.—(continued)

"Ask Lady Jane—she knows. She had a letter from him, and I—I haven't had one line for hundreds of years. Oh ! some day I will go and hide myself, and he won't find me—hide myself in the river where it's deep and dark and cool, flowing under the bridge. I could go now, only not a word to Milton. Poor old soul, she would be sorry."

"Mrs. Sartoris!"—she frowned—"Violet, listen to me. You are ill, you must keep quiet. Lie down on the sofa !"

"I'm not ill. I will go out," trying to pass him. "I will go to the river ; my head's on fire !"

He was terribly alarmed. Every window was open, besides the door. How could he ever stop her without recourse to absolute physical violence. In a moment she might dart through one whilst he was guarding the other. Oh ! if anybody on earth were with him to advise or help !

For a few minutes she was quite silent, with her hands pressed to her throbbing temples. Nobody could guess what was passing through her troubled brain. She had been so hardly used—and none had known how deep the iron had entered into her soul, for with womanly pride she had hidden her pain. For years the sorrow and the sickness of hope deferred had lasted ; for years she had carried a brave front, whilst her heart was breaking. It wanted but the accident at the station to bring matters to a climax—the mischief had been brewing for ages, as week succeeded week of hopeless waiting. She was so ill that Ralph Armitage thought he might venture across the room to ring the bell. He was sure that a doctor ought to be sent for, and that at once.

He trod softly, so as not to arouse her attention ; but for a minute or two he ferreted about without finding the handle of the bell, which was nearly hidden behind a hothouse plant. In his relief at finding it, he rang a peal, and then turned round with an innocent expression as he could assume. The innocence was followed by dismay—Mrs. Sartoris was no longer in the room !

With two or three strides he was out of the further window ; but as he looked eagerly in every direction she was nowhere to be seen !

Mrs. Milton, who had been uneasy all the morning, having caught sight of his face from an upper window, came running out to hear what was the matter, at the same time as Webster, startled by the loudness of the bell, and surprised at the emptiness of the drawing-room, appeared at one of the windows.

"Your mistress is very ill ! " said Ralph, hurriedly ; " and I don't know what has become of her ! "

"I thought she was safe in the drawing-room with you, sir ! " looking at him with anxious eyes.

"So she was ; but she ran out when my back was turned ! Where's the river ! We must find her at once, or I won't answer for the consequences ! "

"Oh, Heaven ! you don't think she would do that ! " her faithful breast heaving with a sob ; and then she pointed towards the shrubbery, and ran down the path wringing her hands. Mr. Armitage sprang over a fence which divided the garden from a grassy slope, and cutting off a corner, made for the end of the shrubbery.

Webster followed cautiously, with wild gesticulations to George the gardener, to come and help. He came, wide eyed and open-mouthed.

"Your mistress ! " panted the butler, as he nearly went head foremost over an ant-hill ; and George, utterly mystified, ran on, seeing that, for some reason, or other, haste was urgently needed. Ralph Armitage cleared a gate at a bound ; and then, turning round with a face white with fear, held up his hands to tell them to be on their guard.

Poor Milton stood still, shaking like a jelly fish, and mopping her face with her pocket-handkerchief, whilst her heart sounded like a hammer in her ears.

The others drew up like pickets posted at different distances ; Ralph went forward cautiously. The river was flowing at his feet almost with the haste and the force of a mountain torrent. The sunshine was laughing on the sparkling waters ; the poplars were standing straight and tall against the deep, blue sky ; a bush was singing sweetly in a thorn-tree close by.

All these details, in after-times, seemed to have been burnt into Armitage's brain ; but at the moment he was only conscious of Violet's slight figure standing in the middle of a slender plank bridge. He advanced as noiselessly as he could on the long, soft grass. She turned her head quickly, moved by some sudden instinct, and saw him. He held his breath—she seemed to waver like a flower in the wind ; the next moment she threw up her arms with a wild cry, and flung herself into the river.

The bubbles flew upward to the sky as Armitage tore off his coat, kicked off his boots and plunged in to the rescue ; but the current was strong, and the stream rapid ; and the servants, watching in frantic fear saw the white dress gleaming faintly amongst the weeds, already many yards away !

CHAPTER X

WHO WILL SAVE HER ?

"Help ! help ! help ! " cried Mrs. Milton, wringing her hands as she ran along the bank, tripped up by a broken bulrush, and nearly sent head foremost on her nose as she caught her foot in a root. "Oh, save her ! Save her, my bonnie lamb ! Heaven have mercy on us ! "

"Get out of the way ! " cried George, the gardener's boy, all his usual respect for the house-keepers knocked out of him by his frantic anxiety about his mistress. He rushed past her, bounding over every obstacle that lay in his way with the activity of youth ; but faster still rushed the waters, as if eager to carry their lovely burden far away from the reach of helping hands.

Ralph Armitage was doing his very best, and straining every nerve, but the current was as strong as his own desire, and the white dress floated further and further away, like the blossom of a water-lily detached from its stem.

If Jack Sartoris could have known that the wife whom he had so easily misjudged was then drowning in the river which was so familiar to him in his boyhood, and if the wish to come could have given him wings to fly to her rescue, a hundred Lady Janes would not have kept him in London.

His strong arms which had yearned after her so longingly would have been stretched to save her ; and when her brown head once rested on his breast, neither a woman's treachery nor his own folly would ever have parted them again.

Cyril Landon would have torn himself from the arms of his bride, and tried if pluck would not enable him to do as much for a dear old friend as another man's strength ; but those who loved her so honestly and truly were far away from Violet Sartoris in her hour of danger. And there was only one left—an acquaintance of yesterday—a dangerous friend for the future, if future there were, to stand between her and the death she had sought.

A hoarse cry came from Webster and Milton as the white dress caught on the top of a stake

in the river, and Violet's slender form swirled round like a tangle of weeds. George jumped in, though doubtful of his own swimming powers; and Armitage struck out with one supreme effort, and caught a long trail of hair which seemed to be floating towards him in the water.

The next moment she was in his arms, and, breathless and almost overcome, he struggled to the bank, where Mrs. Milton, shaking like a leaf, stood ready to receive her mistress.

They gathered round her, tears running down the butler's cheeks, and George blubbering like a baby. Ralph put them all aside, as the house-keeper said afterwards, "In a masterful manner;" and as soon as he had recovered his breath, lifted Violet to his arms as if she had been a child, and made his way towards the house. Mrs. Milton, in spite of her elderly knees knocking together in a curious fashion, hurried on in front. Webster stood still to recover himself, and to wipe his forehead. George ran to pick up Mr. Armitage's coat and hat. Ralph for a few minutes was alone.

He looked down on the sweet face resting so unconsciously on his shoulder, and a thrill ran through his veins.

Good Heavens! to think that this lovely girl belonged in all the pride of her beauty to a man who had cast her off!

Was Sartoris mad to have such a wife, and not to love her!—to leave her to the care and the friendship, and the tenderness, of any other man who might cross her path?

He swore to himself that Sartoris—the husband who was no husband except in name—had lost all right to her.

The blood rushed to his forehead as he stooped his head, his eager lips burning to snatch a kiss.

There was no one to see—a large willow hid them both from the windows of the Priory; he told himself that he was not a man to be held back by a foolish scruple, that he had just saved her life; but for him she would be as dead as the rose-leaves of a forgotten summer; therefore she belonged to him as much as if he had once put a simple circle of gold upon her finger.

He knew it was a cowardly thing to take advantage of her in her complete unconsciousness. He knew that it would be a stain on his manhood, and yet he lent himself to the base desire, and bent his head so low that his breath must have fanned the deathly whiteness of her cheeks; and then his tardy conscience smote him, or the childlike purity of her face rebuked him, or that spark of chivalry which most men who are worthy of the name possess, kindled into vigorous life; anyhow, he drew back, ashamed of his concubine baseness—drew back before his lips had assailed the purity of hers.

A minute later he had laid her down on a sofa in the drawing room; then the whole household gathered round in dismay. There was a hubbub of voices, as one remedy was suggested after another; and telegrams to different relations were discussed, and somebody was sent in hot haste for the doctor.

Mr. Armitage, to do him justice, never lost his head in a crisis. He gave directions, and helped Mrs. Milton to carry them out.

He took one hand, and she the other. They moved each arm up and down, and beat the small head forward on the chest, never stopping till they were rewarded by the first flicker of life in the white face.

When the doctor arrived he acknowledged that the same plan of action had been pursued that he himself would have adopted if he had been on the spot, and said that the patient had passed the first crisis.

He looked very grave when Mrs. Milton told him in hoarse whispers how the so-called "accident" had happened; and after examining the blow on the forehead, said that he did not think it sufficient to account for such an amount of mental disturbance. There was probably some other cause in the background. He looked suggestively at the faithful old servant, but she only shook her head and sighed.

She knew nothing of the envelope found on the lawn, and had been utterly mystified as to the cause of that midnight run to the station;

but whatever she had known she would have kept to herself, for nothing would have induced her to betray her mistress's confidence.

The separation between husband and wife was a constant grief to her, for she had known Jack Sartoris when he was a boy, and had given him quite half of her heart before his forsaken wife appeared to carry off the other.

Her compassion being excited by Violet's desolate position, she watched over her with the tenderness of a nurse rather than with the cold respect of an ordinary servant. She approved of Mr. Landon's attentions to her mistress, and was sure there was no harm in them, because he was the rector's ward, and she knew him as well as if he had been a regular inhabitant of Leighton; but she looked at Ralph Armitage with a suspicious eye, as if he were a wolf with predatory intentions on her pet lamb; and although he had rendered to Violet the greatest service that a man can render, she was anxious for him to take himself off before Lord and Lady Mayne appeared upon the scene. True, she could explain that he was only there because he had missed his train; but Lady Mayne was sure to ask why he was sleeping at the Priory at all, and then the whole story would come out, and the Viscountess was sure to suspect something dreadful behind the scenes.

Fall of these anxieties, she made her way to the drawing-room, where Ralph Armitage was waiting for further news, and after telling him that Mrs. Sartoris was lying quite quiet, and there was every hope that she would fall into a comforting sleep, she began to hum and haw, and made herself very busy about arranging an anti-macassar.

Mr. Armitage looked at her, with a twinkling in his eye, perfectly understanding what she wanted to say.

"I've been studying 'Bradshaw,'" he said, after a pause, "and I don't see how Lady Mayne can possibly be here before a quarter to four."

"No, sir. So I hear from Webster; but I wished to say," looking down at the Albanian scarf which did duty for an anti-macassar and hesitating, "if you are anxious to get back to town, there's no occasion to trouble you to stay, that is to say," hurriedly, "I'll take care to explain to her ladyship exactly how it all happened. And no doubt his lordship will write you a note to thank you for your goodness to the mistress this morning."

"And so you want to get rid of me?" with a quiet smile.

Mrs. Milton started, and looked shocked, as if she had been accused of murder.

"Don't ever go to think such a thing, sir," very earnestly. "Only a gentleman like you is sure to have engagements, and there is a train at a quarter to two, and if you like to go by it Webster will hurry with the lunch."

"You are very good. As to luncheon, I don't care about it; but I'll take myself off, as you wish it. Only I shall be awfully anxious to hear how your mistress is going on."

"I'll send you a telegram myself, sir, if you'll allow me," eagerly; "if you'll take the trouble to write down your address."

He took a card out of his case with the address of his club upon it, and put it on the table, with a sovereign to pay the minute expense. Then, after asking a few more questions about the patient, he went out into the hall, saying he would start at once.

But both Webster and Mrs. Milton felt they could not do enough for him, as he was going to be so kind as to take himself away before the Viscountess's arrival, and insisted upon his eating some of the dainty luncheon which had been prepared from the remains of the supper the night before.

There was a curious smile on Ralph Armitage's face as he walked through the pleasure-grounds of the Priory. He felt as if he had stepped out of his ordinary life into an exciting drama, the plot of which he could not guess, though he had played an important part in it.

Only yesterday morning he had grumbled excessively at being dragged down to the country for a humdrum wedding, maintaining

that he had half a hundred engagements, which ought to have kept him in London; and then the sight of a flower-like face, framed in a simple grey bonnet, seemed suddenly to change the village of Leighton into a terrestrial paradise; and London, with all its crowds and pleasures, faded into insignificance beside it. For some reason best known to himself, he did not go near his sister, so that Lady Jane was for a long time unaware of Violet's illness. Mr. Armitage mentioned the scene by the river to no one, and Lady Mayne kept equally silent. She knew how soon evil reports were spread, and how easily the delirium of brain fever might be construed into madness; therefore Bertie Mayne and Lady Stapleton were the only people who knew anything of the attempt at suicide, besides the father and mother, and the man who had rushed to the rescue.

Mrs. Milton had done very unwisely when she hurried Ralph Armitage away before Lady Mayne arrived. The Viscountess was surprised that he and his sister had slept at the Priory; astounded at the thought that he had stayed behind when Lady Jane went up to town, and very much offended at his going away without stopping to explain matters to the anxious parents.

"Sneaking away like that!" she said to her husband, when, after a long afternoon spent by the patient's bedside, they both came down to the dining-room to partake of a hurried dinner. "I tell you what it looks like, as if he didn't dare to face us. There must be something we know nothing about in the background."

"From what I've heard of Armitage's character he's not a man I could trust," said the Viscount, with a touch of annoyance in his tone. "I wonder where on earth Violet picked him up!"

"Wherever she picked him up she needn't have brought him home with her," said his wife severely. "I can't understand it. Violet used to be so very particular. I remember her telling me that she never even invited such an old friend as Cyril Landon to the house."

"That was carrying propriety unnecessarily far. Why, bless me, Cyril was like a brother to her! I never heard such nonsense. But we've never known the whole story about Violet and her wretched husband. We've always taken it for granted that he was the only one to blame; but, depend upon it, if there had not been faults on both sides, the poor girl would have confided in you long ago. No woman could hold her tongue year after year unless she had a thundering good reason for doing so."

Lady Mayne shook her head and sighed, as her thoughts went back to the day of her daughter's marriage, and she remembered what a happy future she had dreamt of for her eldest girl.

Those bright hopes were blasted at once, and now, after this escapade with Ralph Armitage, society would be certain to seize upon the once spotless name, and weave a scandal round it.

What would Bertie say when he arrived by the first train he could catch?

CHAPTER XV.

THE FIRST DOUBT.

"Give him back to me!" cried Violet, with puffed lips, as her head tossed restlessly on her pillow; and her lovely eyes, bright with fever, wandered from face to face, as if trying to compel an answer to her piteous cry. "Oh, give him back! Hark! hark! he is calling me! I know he's here. I hear his step; let me go to him, let me go!"

Then she would raise herself up, and try to throw off the clothes, preparatory to jumping out of bed, but her mother laid a restraining hand upon her shoulder, and Mrs. Milton, with the tears running down her cheeks, stood close by the bedside ready to stop her mistress from any rash action.

The trained nurse was on the other side of the bed watching "the case" with an imper-

turbulent expression on her pleasant, careworn face.

The Viscount was in the dressing room with his son, a good looking young fellow of about six-and-twenty.

Each had a newspaper in his hand, but neither knew much of its contents, for that piteous voice from the next room was all absorbing in its wild, incoherent appeal. And as the father and brother listened their hearts rose up in fiercest anger against the absent husband, who had deserted his bride on her wedding-day, and brought her to this desperate position.

Neither would have stirred a hand to let him know! They took it for granted that there was not a remnant of tenderness left in his heart, and that the most welcome news that could be sent him would be that the tie which had galled him was broken for ever.

If Violet died now in the prime of her youthful beauty, Bertie told himself angrily that Jack Sartoris would be her murderer; and it incensed him to think that this peculiar sort of moral murder was exactly the kind which would never bring the murderer to the gallows. If he came to England he might cut him dead when he met him, either in the club or the street; but that would not do him much harm, and probably would not cost him a moment's uneasiness.

And yet he remembered the time when he considered Jack Sartoris as the best fellow out, and thought his sister lucky to get such an excellent husband.

According to what he remembered of him, he would have said that he was the last man in the world to cast off a girl who had trusted herself to him without the most ample and the direst amount of cause.

If his wife had been anyone but his sister he would have taken it for granted that she was certainly in the wrong, and that Sartoris had discovered something terrible about her, which he was too chivalrous to divulge; but as to Violet he could take his oath that there was nothing queer about her.

She was as pure as the daisies on the lawn, with no more thought of ill in her innocent heart than in a child of six.

He had been so proud of her when she first came out, and one man after another fell head over ears in love with his pretty sister.

He considered then that no one was good enough for her except Jack Sartoris, and he told his mother that she would have the best son-in-law in England.

His confidence in his friend never failed him, till the startling news reached the home circle that the bride was with her aunt at Millefleurs, and the bridegroom gone away on his travels.

He went over to France at once, telling his father that he would find out the reason why, or eat his hat; but after a few days he came back looking crestfallen, for he was obliged to confess that he was no wiser than when he started.

Violet would explain nothing in spite of his urgent exhortations, which gradually developed into entreaties; neither would she come back to England to be stared at by all her acquaintances. For the present, she told him, she meant to stay with Lady Stapleton; for the future her plans were undecided.

He remembered it all as if it had been yesterday—his mother's tears, his father's anger, the wonder and dismay of his other sister—and, thinking over it, he cursed Jack Sartoris as the destroyer of Violet's happiness.

The old friendship which had been so dear to them both was forgotten, and the bitterest enmity awoke in its stead.

Perhaps if Bertie could have seen his old friend standing in the Countess of Oldthorpe's drawing-room, his face haggard, his eyes fixed with positively hungry longing on Lady Jane's eager face, he would have misjudged him still more, and never guessed that the anxiety and the longing were all for the deserted wife, and not for Lady Jane herself.

Her heart was in a flutter of excitement as she looked up into the face which was so strangely changed by a long deadly illness, as well as by the growth of a beard and the passing of many years, that few of his friends recognised him.

It was changed; but she thought it just as handsome as ever, although in a different style, and it had a charm for her still that none other possessed, and she was just as wickedly anxious as ever to keep him away from the only woman who had a right to his affections.

She told herself that he had been stolen from her, and with this salve to her conscience went on, adding evasion to evasion till the evasions grew into downright lies, and the lies into gross treachery.

Perfectly honest and straightforward himself, he trusted her completely. Cyril Landon's marriage startled him almost into distrust; but, as we have seen, Lady Jane with her cunning tongue turned the event to her own advantage.

"You are certain that blow on the head was not serious!" he said earnestly, looking down into her face with a searching glance that made her voice falter. It was so hard not to tell the whole truth when under the fire of his eyes. She moved her own away from his before she answered.

"Quite certain—I saw her myself this morning sleeping like a healthy child; and, as I told you, I passed the whole night at the Priory, so I ought to know something about it."

"It was very good of you"—gratefully. "I am glad the poor child has one friend to look after her. I hope it didn't put you to great inconvenience! You had your brother with you, I believe!"

"Last night—yes; but I had to come up all by myself," raising her eyebrows pathetically, "and I didn't like it."

"How was that?" quickly.

"Because my brother liked the Priory too much to leave it."

"He stayed behind!" his voice shaking with concentrated rage. "Then I think the sooner I ran down the better," stooping to pick up his hat. "At least, I can act the part of a watchdog."

She saw the mistake she had made, and hastened to retrieve it.

"Nonsense! He only missed his train, the lazy fellow! You would not find him if you went; and you would do your wife any amount of harm. There will be nothing to keep him—that old woman with the substantial waist won't let her mistress leave her room, you may be sure of that—and he would only feel horribly dull downstairs, with no one to speak to."

"Still I think I shall go."

She rose in great excitement, her light eyes absolutely glittering with eagerness.

"Go, and kill your wife if you like! After keeping away from her for six years, and making her the talk of London, run helter-skelter down to see her when she has just had a bad fall, and the slightest excitement might turn her brain. Do you want to see her in a madhouse?"

"I want to see her in her own home"—doggedly. "I'm sick to death of this lonely kind of life. And now that Landon's out of the way—"

"Out of the way—for how long? Does his marriage of yesterday make any real difference? If there was a reason for you to turn your back on your wife six years ago, isn't there a reason still? Have you seen the present Mrs. Landon? A girl as thin as a lath, with consumption painted on her cheeks. She will soon be removed to another sphere after having served as a buffer against scandal for a time!"

Sartoris ground his heel into the fluffy surface of the carpet. Had he been a fool to come back? Had his longings been all folly? Had his growing conviction that he had parted from his young wife too rashly been nothing more than a sentimental delusion? How could he tell, with this woman's deceitful words pouring into his unwilling ears?

"Tell me frankly," his deep voice not so steady as usual; "has she ever seemed to want me?"

Lady Jane was silent for a whole minute. She remembered Violet's intense eagerness about that envelope, because there was her husband's handwriting upon it.

She remembered the anxious questions she had asked, and the look of silent sorrow which

rested like a blight on the lovely face; and yet, remembering all this, she looked away from him, as she answered, with affected carelessness,—

"If she really wants you, I think she consoles herself pretty well."

"You mean that she plays on the piano. She was always fond of that, and she still enjoys sketching!"

As a matter of fact Lady Jane was not aware that Violet had ever touched either pencil or paint brush, but she had a fertile mind, and instantly imagined the circumstances to be as she wished them to be. Therefore she answered reflectively,

"As to sketching, I daresay she likes it very well when she has somebody pleasant always at hand to put the finishing touches, or say a word about the lights and shadows; and there is nothing so nice as to play to a thoroughly appreciative listener. Cyril, you know, is as musical as a young Beethoven."

"I did not know it," bitterly. "Pray, is he an artist as well?"

"Of course he is, and nothing delights him more than to have a pretty woman for his pupil."

"By Heaven! if I caught him teaching my wife!" frowning angrily.

"But then you wouldn't catch him," quietly; and after a pause she added,—

"When are you off again?"

He bit his lip, as he leant his elbow against the mantelpiece. A glimmer of distrust crossed his mind. Was it possible that Lady Jane, for some reason of her own, wished to keep him separated from his wife?

But what reason could there be for such a wish—supposing she liked him as she used to seven or eight years ago?

It was not a liking which could last through one long year after the other; and even supposing that it had lasted, it would do her no good to keep them apart.

Even if she were base enough to desire it she could derive no benefit from it, for he could not marry her, and he would only go away, and she would never see him from year's end to year's end.

It was a shameful thing to doubt her, when she was the only one of his friends who had the womanliness to think of him in his loneliness, and to send him tidings of his poor wife.

He crossed the room hastily, and stood before her, whilst she dropped almost trembling into a chair.

"You wouldn't deceive me, would you, Lady Jane?"

"Deceive you!" she gasped, feeling like a conspirator unmasked.

He was ashamed of the thought even as he spoke it out.

"You have no ill-feeling against the poor girl?"

"Jack, you insult me!" starting to her feet and quivering with fright and excitement, taking refuge in rage, as many a craftier plotter has done before when pressed by an awkward question.

"Forgive me. I was a brute," overcome with compunction, "but I'm so bothered; 'pon my word I scarcely know what I'm saying;" and he wrung her hand in a hearty grasp, to show his penitence and his undoubting trust for the future. Then he took up his hat, and went out of the room, leaving Lady Jane alone with her conscience!

CHAPTER XII.

A CRIME.

VIOLET SARTORIS lay for a long time in the cheerful bedroom where Lady Jane had seen her hovering between life and death. The same cry was always on her lips, whenever suffering from an access of delirium. The name which Lady Mayne had grown to hate was always ringing in her ears. Driven almost to distraction, she would have sent for the man who had brought this trouble and anxiety upon them if she had known that he was in England. Sometimes she thought they ought to send for him in any case, and

then, imagining that perhaps he might be at the furthest extremity of Siberia. If the summons ever reached him, and he answered it in person, he might arrive to find his wife quite well, and the pride of the whole Mayne family would have been lowered for nothing. To ask him to come back would be so dreadful, and she would be so much more comfortable without him. In fact she felt that she could not support the idea of his living on one side of her daughter, and herself on the other, and taking the management of the sick-room out of her hands into his own. It would be difficult even to stay in the same house with him after all that had passed, especially as the Priory was his property, and never had really belonged to his wife. So that when Lord Mayne conscientiously suggested that perhaps Sartoris ought to be sent for, the idea was snatched at once by Berdie and Gertrude, as well as by his wife. Gertrude had done her duty by her family, and married a young Earl not long after Violet's ill-starred union.

Her husband, Lord Woodbridge, was inveterate in his anger against the man who by his extraordinary conduct had caused such havoc to his sister-in-law's peace. If he didn't want to have her, why did he ask her to marry him? Why should he pick out such an innocent girl as Violet Mayne, of irreproachable antecedents, of aristocratic birth, of unusual beauty, to cast a slur upon her in the first hours of their short-lived union? Lord Woodbridge had no patience with such a ruffian; and of course his pretty wife, who was so desperately fond of her sister, hated Jack Sartoris with a fierceness that was not natural to one of her gentle disposition. She was always saying, with a flush of her blue eyes, that if she could meet him she would give him a piece of her mind; but as she never met him, he still went about unharmed.

The tears rolled down her cheeks as she heard Violet calling for him so wildly; but instead of trying to satisfy her she only took it as a further proof of her wandering mind and said, "Poor dear I she wouldn't want him if she knew what she was about!"

Thus it was that those who loved her best, as well as the one who hated her most, fought against the unhappy wife's true interest. Over that sick bed, peace might have been made between the two almost without an explanation.

Jack Sartoris loved her too truly not to be touched by her wasted cheeks and haggard eyes. At the first sight of her poor little face, which when he last saw it was so bright with beauty and youth, he would have taken her to his heart, and asked for nothing better than to keep her there for ever.

But it was not to be, for mistaken affection and a woman's hatred, born of jealousy, strove against it.

Lady Jane, when she heard that Violet was ill, trembled, and lay awake night after night, but yet she kept the news to herself; and only told him that the Maynes had established themselves at the Priory, which she knew was enough to prevent him from going down.

She was in a fever to get him out of London; and yet it was a delight to have him dropping in day after day, though it was only to talk over the old topic, which she hated with all her heart.

Very few of his friends knew he was in town; and his appearance was so altered that when he went to the Carlton nobody recognised him—not even the porter, whose duty it was never to forget the face of a member.

The yellow fever which he had caught in New Orleans, and of which he had nearly died alone, amongst strangers, had changed him completely. He lost all his hair, and when it grew again the bright golden chestnut had changed to a shade that was nearly black; added to which, instead of only having a heavy moustache on his short upper lip, he grew a beard which covered up entirely the lower part of his face. The fever could not take his beauty of feature from him, but the brightness of his complexion had gone; and instead of looking, as before, a handsome example of an Englishman, he might almost have been taken for a Spaniard or Italian, except for the cut of his hat.

In his great unselfishness he kept away from

his own people, lest they might question him about his wife, and from his silence suspect something to her disadvantage.

At last, tired of London without the usual crowd of friends, bringing with them a list of engagements, which though sometimes a bore to keep gave him a pleasant feeling of being in request, he made up his mind to start for Russia.

Before leaving England he would run down to Farndon Court in Devonshire, and he would write a letter to his wife, offering to come back to her, to let bygones be bygones, without one word about the past; without requiring a single promise for the future if only she would frankly confess that she wanted him.

From her answer he must learn what he most wanted to know—whether she still had a shred of love for him.

Unfortunately on his way to the post he called on Lady Jane, and told her of his intention.

She turned as white as her own handkerchief, and for a minute was dumb, knowing that if the letter once reached Violet's hands all her plans would be upset, and her treachery would be exposed in the eyes of the man she loved so recklessly.

After that one minute, when she felt utterly staggered, her presence of mind returned. He had taken the letter out of his pocket, and was studying the address as if it had a fascination for him.

He was so absorbed that he never noticed Lady Jane's agitation, or that she went up to an ornamental little writing-table, and took another letter from inside a blotting-book.

"You want it to go by the half-past four?" she said, glancing at the clock.

"Yes, I have a fancy for posting it myself," rising from his seat, as if on the point of departure.

"I can understand that!" with a forced smile; "but you know it will be quite safe if I send it by George; and my mother really wants to speak to you. She told me to keep you if you happened to look in, as she wants to ask your advice about Ned Clinton."

She rang the bell as she spoke.

"What about him?"

"He is thinking of trying farming in Virginia, and she thought you could tell us if there was any chance of success."

"I know very little about it. One farmer told me that for three years his crops had been ruined by a succession of floods, so he was trying his hand at horse-dealing, and making money by it too. You can tell Lady Oldthorpe."

"No, I can't tell her!" hurriedly. "She never trusts my messages; she says I always forget. Here's George; give me the letter."

She almost snatched it from his hand, and went quickly towards the footman without waiting for him to come up to her.

On her way she slipped Sartoris's letter into her pocket, and it was the other one which she had taken from the blotting-book, which she gave to George with strict directions to post it at once, and come back and tell her if it were really in time. Then she returned to Jack, her heart beating fast with excitement.

"You see nothing can be safer than that. I only told him to let me know if it were in time, in order to satisfy you. Do sit down; my mother will be here directly."

He sat down, feeling rather cross, and as if he had done a foolish thing; but he told himself that there was no reason why the Oldthorpe's footman should not take his letter as safely as himself, and that he was really a fool to be so fidgety.

He was so absorbed with his own reflections that he noticed nothing odd in Lady Jane's manner, though her thoughts seemed to be straying uncontrollably, for she answered some of his questions quite wrong.

Lady Oldthorpe did not appear for such a long time that he was tired of waiting for her, and went away with a strange feeling of dissatisfaction clinging to him.

As soon as he was gone Lady Jane drew the letter from her pocket, took it out of the envelope, and tore it straight across—resisting the tempta-

tion to read it—as if it mattered much whether she read it or not, when she had been so base as to steal it!

Her eyes flashed with rage and triumph as with slow, deliberate malice she tore the words of peace and forgiveness into undecipherable atoms.

Her better angel kept whispering in her ear that this was a fiendish act, only worthy of the lowest of her sex; but she would not listen. Her hatred was burning more fiercely than the flames with which she consumed the scraps on the pretty painted tiles inside the fender.

Her face was flushed, her brain in a fever, her hands cold and clammy. She stood in the fancifully-furnished boudoir like some statue of Medusa.

At her feet lay the happiness of two lives. In her hands, but a few minutes before, she held the links which were to bind them together; now by her own act she had separated them perhaps for ever.

And there was something else beyond this—whether above or below one can scarcely say. She had taken the irreverent step; she had chosen evil instead of good. From comparative innocence she had plunged with one bound into crime. She had dipped her aristocratic hands not into blood, but into the mire which clings and soils, and breeds corruption.

For a moment she triumphed in her sin, and laughed aloud; but the sound of her own laughter started her, and the noise of an opening door made her shake like a convicted thief.

She had deceived Jack Sartoris, she had cruelly injured his young wife; but she had not despised her conscience, and in the silence of the night, when there was no maid or conversation to distract her, she knew herself for the contemptible sinner that she was—and yet she was farther off from penitence than ever.

CHAPTER XIII.

A BRIGHT IDEA.

LADY STAPLETON prided herself on her independence, and would not acknowledge that she was bound to drag a companion with her wherever she went, because she happened to be the widow of a peer. Therefore she appeared at the Priory by one train, and her maid by another; and she shocked Lady Mayne by driving up to the door alone in a common cab!

After a long visit to the sick-room she came out, her lips pressed together with the consciousness of a firm resolution. What this resolution was she confided to no one, but buried it as deeply as possible in her own breast.

"As soon as the poor girl is a little better you must let her come down with me to Somersthshire, and I engage to return her to you perfectly healthy and perfectly happy before the autumn."

"Healthy I hope she may be, but happy—never—so long as that wretched husband of hers exists!" said Lady Mayne, with a sigh. "Or why didn't we know what was to follow when we gave our consent so easily! I had a foreboding of something dreadful all the time."

"I can't say I had," said Lady Stapleton, with a smile. "I took a fancy to Jack the moment I saw him; and even now I can't help thinking that he is under some delusion, or he never would have behaved so extraordinarily."

"He is either a lunatic or a scoundrel!" said Lady Mayne, impatiently. "And I must say the news of his death would give me sincere pleasure."

"My dear Mary!" and Lady Stapleton looked quite shocked, although she knew that the gentlest of mothers will turn fierce when the happiness of a child is injured.

She did not stay very long at the Priory; but she heard a great deal in praise of the absent master from the faithful old housekeeper, Mrs. Milton, who was only too glad of a listener; an old story after story, which plainly showed that, instead of always having been a monster, there was a time when Jack Sartoris was a kind-heart-

fallow, ever ready to give a helping hand to anyone in trouble.

Lady Stapleton pondered over these traits of character, and found it hard to reconcile them with his treatment of her niece. More than ever she longed for a personal interview with him, feeling sure that a few words would set everything right; but she did not see her way to it. She could have gone to his bankers and found out his address—that was not her difficulty; but she felt that it would be beneath her dignity as the sister of Lord Mayne to take the first step towards a reconciliation. And yet on the day she left her heart was so wrung with pity for her niece that she vowed to herself, if an opportunity came in her way, nothing should induce her to let it slip, even if the whole Mayne family rose up in anger against her.

Full of undefined projects, she came up to town, and on arriving at Victoria Station was so deep in thought that she got out of the train before it had stopped. She would have had a serious fall if a gentleman who was standing on the platform had not darted forward and caught her literally in his arms.

"Lady Stapleton!" he exclaimed, in surprise; and then he stooped to pick up a sunshade which she had dropped, and she recovered enough breath to thank him.

"You have the advantage over me," she said, with a courteous smile. "Your name has slipped my memory."

His face grew stern, as he drew himself up stiffly. Raising his hat, he said slowly, "Jack Sartoris, very much at your service." And feeling that she probably looked upon him as the greatest scoundrel that ever went unhung, he turned away without any further proffer of help. But Lady Stapleton, when she saw an opportunity, generally knew how to grasp it.

"Mr. Sartoris," she said, faintly, "would you do me a further kindness and put me into a brougham, if you can find one?"

Instantly his face brightened. Evidently there was one member of the Mayne family who did not regard him as an outcast, and he went in search of a carriage with alacrity.

When he had found one, put her into it, seen that her luggage was placed on the box, &c., then he was marching off again in a great hurry; but she looked out of the window and said,—

"Are you really the Mr. Sartoris who married my niece? You don't look a bit like him."

"I am that brute, as I suppose you call him," with a short laugh; "but I had a fever out there, which changed my appearance, though unfortunately not my identity. A pity I didn't die—I'm sure you think so," trying futilely to make a hole in the platform with his stick.

Lady Stapleton thought of her sister-in-law's hasty wish, and answered more heartily than she otherwise would have done,—

"I'm sure I don't, Mr. Sartoris. Will you think it very odd if I ask you to call upon an old woman like myself at the Buckingham Palace Hotel at four to-morrow?"

Her heart beat rather fast as she thought of the bold step which she was taking after all her resolutions to the contrary; but a subtle impulse seemed to draw her on against her will, and she watched his face breathlessly.

A bright smile shone out across its gravity, and for the first time it reminded her of the Jack Sartoris she used to know.

"I don't know about the oddness; but I understand the kindness," he said, simply. "I will do myself the honour to call at four."

Then he bowed low, and walked away with a more cheerful look on his face than it had worn since his return to England; and Lady Stapleton drove to her hotel with a confident conviction that the mystery would soon be cleared away, and her niece be made happy in spite of everything.

The next day she felt quite excited as the hour for the interview drew near. She trembled to think what would happen if Bertie Mayne casually dropped in, and found himself face to face with his brother-in-law.

They could not come to blows under her nose, but "the situation would be strained," as they

say in diplomacy, and it would be an uncomfortable moment for all three.

Lady Stapleton was about five-and-forty, of a fair, aristocratic face, and an exceedingly charming manner.

She was dressed very handsomely in silver-grey, and wore a cap of delicate lace on her glossy brown hair.

Altogether she was a pleasant specimen of English womanhood, and so Jack Sartoris found her when he was ushered into her comfortable sitting-room at the hour named.

She received him with a certain amount of reserve at first, which she considered only due to her brother's family. But this gradually gave way before the charm of his simple manner.

They talked long and very gravely, the discussion only being interrupted by the arrival of tea. Over the tea they grew more confidential, and she elicited the fact that he had written to his wife a fortnight ago, which proved conclusively that he wished for peace. She was exulting over this, whilst he was gloomily remembering that to his last appeal he had received no answer.

"But, my dear Mr. Sartoris, how could you expect to?" she exclaimed, cheerfully. "The poor girl has been on a sick bed ever since her accident; and, really, at one time we were afraid that she would never get over it."

"She has been ill!" hoarsely, whilst the blood rushed up into his face, and his heart stood still.

"Ill! I should think she had. And you were in England and never came near her," her voice growing reproachful. "Fancy if she had died, and this quarrel had never been ended!"

There was a silence, during which the noise of the traffic outside was the only sound in the room. Then Sartoris drew a deep breath, and said, huskily,—

"What do you say of those who kept the news from me? Good Heavens! when I think of it, clutching his hands, whilst the veins of his forearms swelled like small ropes. "They call themselves Christians, and behave with the cruelty of savages."

"I don't agree with you," coldly. "You had cast the poor girl off. It wasn't for them to call you—it was for you to go."

"I would have gone if she had shown the smallest sign of wanting me. But year after year I heard sufficient to keep me away," with intense bitterness, as he stared dully at the carpet.

Lady Stapleton looked at him reflectively.

"What do you mean? Violet has lived like a recluse; seeing no one—going nowhere."

"A recluse who gives dances, with no one to chaperone her."

"Ah! I heard of that escapade. It was the night of Cyril Lundon's wedding. You must remember there was a good deal of excitement to be worked off!"

A scornful look flashed from his eyes, and then his expression changed. He remembered that since he had seen it that small brown head had been in danger; and in a voice that vibrated with deepest feeling he asked for every detail.

Lady Stapleton gave a full and graphic account from the moment when Violet fell into the water—by accident, as she supposed—the true version being kept from her till now, when she was creeping back to life, looking like a ghost of her former self!

He listened with his heart in his eyes, hanging on every word, absorbed with the thought that his young wife might actually have gone to the rest, which is never broken, whilst he was in London only a few miles from her.

Lady Stapleton soon saw that he was as anxious as anyone could be to make up the quarrel; and suddenly a bright idea flashed into her mind by which she thought it could be effected.

She pondered over it for some time, wondering whether it would bear the light of day, or whether it was too ridiculously like a play. Before Jack Sartoris took his leave she could not resist the temptation of imparting it to him.

To her surprise he caught at it eagerly, and soon their chairs were drawn closer together, and their voices lowered to the most confidential tones.

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"ANY DOCTOR WILL TELL YOU 'there is no better Cough Medicine.'—One gives relief: if you suffer from cough try them but once: they will cure, and they will not injure your health; an increasing sale of over 60 years in a certain test of their value. Sold in 1/2d. tins."



GOLDBEATERS, by hammering, can reduce gold leaves so thin that 282,000 must be laid on each other to produce the thickness of an inch. They are so thin that, if formed into a book, 15,000 would only occupy the space of a single leaf of common paper.

In the water one finds various creatures that are not possessed of sufficient energy to do their own travelling, and so calmly impound something else to act as steed. The remora, or sucking-fish, thinks nothing of a thousand-mile trip fastened tight on the back of a shark or the hull of a ship, and when it lets go never dreams of offering a fare, or even so much as a thank-you.

"It would be a fresh start, wouldn't it?" she said, when at last he stood up to go; "and if it fails we shall only be where we were before. Mind, not a soul must know of it!" holding up her finger. "Everything depends on the most profound secrecy!"

"You may count on me to hold my tongue. I can't say how grateful I am to you, Lady Stapleton," as he pressed her hand.

"Not at all. It will be quite a piece of fun. I shall enjoy it intensely, and I shall expect an invitation to Fardon Court for Christmas."

"You won't need an invitation! You know you'll be always welcome; if only——," with a deep-drawn breath.

"Keep up your courage! All will come right in the end!"

With this cheerful admonition she parted from him at the door, and he went down the steps of the hotel with a new hope in his heart. What would come of it he could not tell, but it was something to have one ray of comfort in the gloom.

(To be continued.)

FACETIES.

THE BLONDE: "Did he bid you long a farewell?" The Brunette: "Yes; from 9 P.M. until 2 A.M."

THE BOSS: "So you want a job, do you? What can you do?" Applicant: "Nothing in particular—but then work is not so much an object as good wages."

"I DISOWN YOU!" cried the angry parent. "I shall cut you off with a shilling!" "Yes, sir," replied the erring son meekly. "And may I have the shilling now?"

WILLIE: "Did you propose to my sister last night?" Featherstone: "Eh—ah! Why, Willie!" Willie: "'Cause everybody in the house has been guying the life out of her."

SHE: "You seem to be very much interested in that couple in the middle of the floor." He: "Yes; I look at them and see if you can figure out which it is that can't dance."

BOARDER: "You made me pay in advance at first because I was a stranger. That was all right. But I am not a stranger now." Landlady: "No; I know you now."

"I AM WILLING to do anything," said the applicant for work. "All right," said the hard-hearted merchant. "Please close the door behind you when you go out."

HUSBAND: "Didn't you tell that cook I wanted my breakfast directly?" Wife: "I did." "And what did she say?" "Said that we all have our disappointments."

TOSEY: "That slender Miss Simpson looks like a very delicate girl." Wopsey: "Oh, I don't know; she must have a good deal of strength to squeeze her waist in like that."

NELL: "I thought you said May's fiance was a white-haired octogenarian! His hair is jet black." Belle: "Ah, that's what he meant, then, when he said he would dye for her."

MORRIS: "I Cannot Make Him Smile" (reading the title of her poem). "You want to make him smile bad, eh?" Miss Violet (with indignant inflection): "Sir!" Editor: "Show him your poem."

JONES: "That was a fierce fight you had with Gussie. He claims he beat you." Cholly: "Oh, the boath! It's twice he wumpled my oswat dweadfully, bat when it was all ovah his collah was in a frightful state."

"AH! George," she sighed, "do you remember how we used to sit on one chair at papa's?" "That was all right at papa's," replied practical George; "but I'm not a going to forget these chairs cost me good money."

Mrs. CLUBKIN: "But, Henry dear, is this photograph you have but one button on your coat?" Mr. Clubknight: "Thank goodness you've noticed it at last! That's why I had the photograph taken."

"I OFTEN wonder just what she thinks of me," said the young married man. "It is easy to find out," said the elderly married man. "Just sit down on her hat, and she will tell you what she thinks of you in less than a minute."

THE OLD STAGER: "Young man, if you would be successful, you must do two things. First, get some enemies." The Aspirant: "And second?" The Old Stager: "Second, irritate them so that they will make you prominent."

"Do you see that very ordinary-looking man over there?" "Yes; what of it?" "He's a man with a history." "A man with a history! What has he ever done?" "Nothing at all. He's selling the history by subscription."

HUSBAND: "This is really an awfully good photograph of you. I must put it somewhere where I can always see it." Wife (sarcastically): "Yes, my dear; I'll give you a small frame for it, and you can hang it up in the smoking-room at the club."

MAMMA: "Has Mr. Dorrance given you any reason to believe that he means business?" Clara: "Business! I should think he did mean business! I'm sick of the word business. All he has talked about the last three times he has been here was papa's business."

CUSTOMER: "I bought this cane of you yesterday, and you said the handle was genuine ivory; but I find it's imitation." Shopman: "Indeed? Why, I order my goods direct from Ceylon; but it's not impossible, of course, that the elephants there wear false tusks."

CALLER: "Land sakes! How late it is." Mrs. Suburb: "Oh, you mustn't go by that clock. It's two hours fast." Caller: "Why don't you set it right?" Mrs. Suburb: "Horror, no! Don't touch it. That's the clock my husband catches trains by."

THE professor who thought his system was running down asked his old enemy, the doctor, to prescribe for him. "All the medicine you need," said the doctor, after listening to a recital of the symptoms, "is a tonic in the shape of fresh air." "Well," responded the professor, slightly irritated, "what is the shape of fresh air?"

SEEKER: "I understand that Miss. Woody has become affianced to old Bondman, the septuagenarian banker." Sagedman: "It's a fact." Seeker: "I wonder what influence induced her to take the step?" Sagedman: "It wasn't a question of influence at all, my boy; it was one of affiance."

SCENE: Barber's shop. Tonsorial artist (surveying his victim): "Your hair is getting very thin, sir." Victim: "Yes; I've been treating it with antifat. I never liked stout hair." You really should put something on it." "So I do—every morning." "May I ask what?" "My hat." The rest was silence.

HE: "Why don't you wear your new bonnet, my dear?" She: "Oh, there's something wrong with it, and I can't find out what it is." He: "Then how do you know there is something wrong with it?" She: "All the women in the neighbourhood say it is too lovely for anything."

Mrs. HIGHBLOWER: "Don't forget, my dear, that in conversation the interest must not be allowed to flag." Clara: "But I'm sure I do my best, mamma." Mrs. Highblower: "May be so; but while the pianist was playing I thought, once or twice, that I detected you listening to him."

Mr. NEWLYWED (struggling to carve the first turkey his wife has ever cooked): "I say, Mary, the bones in this bird are as brittle as flint. Just you hear the knife grit." Mrs. Newlywed (almost crying with anger): "You must be against the shells, John! Shells!" "Yes, John. Don't you remember that you asked me to stuff the turkey with oysters?"

"JOHN," she said softly, "I have concluded to do without a new hat, and send for mother with the money. It won't take much to pay her expenses here." "My dear," he cried excitedly, "the idea of your wearing that old bonnet another day is too horrible for me to endure, and I'll never enter this house again till you get a new one!" Then she kissed him lightly.

ANGRY WIFE: "It seems to me we've been married a century. I can't even remember when or where we first met." Husband (emphatically): "I can. It was at a dinner-party where there were thirteen at table."

"Do you know," said the rising humorist, "that I usually think of my best jokes just after I wake in the morning?" "Huh!" said his best friend, in great haste. "Do you know, I usually read them just before I go to sleep at night."

Of course, Susan, if you intend to get married that is your own business," said the mistress to the cook, "but you mustn't forget that marriage is a very serious matter." "Yes, ma'am, I know it is sometimes," remarked the domestic, "but maybe I'll have better luck than you did."

OLD GENTLEMAN: "Do you think, sir, that you are able to give my daughter all the luxuries to which she has been accustomed?" Sailor (a practical man): "Well, you have been paying for her board and clothes, and I have been paying for concerts, theatres, operas, and so on. Now, I'll pay for the board and clothes, and if you foot the amusement bills, I don't think she'll miss any thing."

"YOU say your wife threw a plate at you?" "Yes; it was a fine china plate. It broke against my head." "Didn't she appear sorry after she threw it?" "Yes, she appeared very sorry." "Ah, indeed. And what did she say?" "She said she was a fool not to control her temper." "Good. And what else did she say?" "She said she didn't believe she could match that plate again if she hunted the town through."

"DON'T you know better than to tackle a man for a coin when he is talking to ladies?" said the citizen at the street corner, fumbling in his pocket and finding nothing less than sixpence, which he reluctantly handed out. "Mebby you understand my business better'n I do, an' mebby you don't," haughtily replied Taffy Kout, pocketing the coin and moving on with his greasy old hat at a pronounced angle on the side of his head.

A WOMAN who unexpectedly came into a fortune established a country home where she lived in style. One day she was showing some of her old-time friends the place, when they came to the poultry yard. "What beautiful chickens!" they exclaimed. "All prize fowl," haughtily explained the hostess. "Do they lay every day?" was the next question. "Oh, they could, of course," was the reply, "but in our position it is not necessary for them to do so!"

MR. ROCKINGHAM: "No, sir, I cannot consent to let my daughter become the wife of a man who is as wild as you are." Mr. Honeywell: "How do you know I am wild, sir?" Mr. Rockingham: "Oh, that's all right. I get about town a little myself occasionally, and hear these things from people who know all about us." Mr. Honeywell: "Very well; I'll go and explain to Alice and her mother how it is." Mr. Rockingham: "I say, hold on. My boy, you can have her. It's all right. I was only bluffing you."

IN a large business establishment the other day the head of the firm was much annoyed by one of his clerks going to sleep. Waking him up he demanded,—"What do you mean, sir, by going to sleep at your desk in broad daylight?" "I beg a thousand pardons," replied the clerk, "but my baby kept me awake all last night, and I am dead tired." "Oh, well," replied the head of the firm, unfeelingly, "you had better bring the child to business to-morrow, so that you may keep awake during the day as well."

A MAN rang up a lady acquaintance of his some days ago, but instead of her answering the phone herself her elder sister did so. The young man recognised the difference at once, and said in a grave, mellow voice,—"Won't you please deliver a message to Miss Clara?" Delighted at the prospect of carrying a message that might result in giving her some insight into the relation that existed between her sister and the young man at the other end of the line, she answered,—"Why, certainly, with the greatest of pleasure." "Well, tell her to come to the phone."

SOCIETY.

PRINCESS ALICE OF ALBANY is to make her *début* in Court society at Berlin in January next.

THE Duchess of Coburg, who is coming to England in January for the first time since the death of the Duke of Saxe-Coburg, will not go to Clarence House, but to Buckingham Palace, before proceeding upon a visit to the Queen at Osborne.

THE Duke and Duchess of York are to have Clarence House, which is to be specially redecorated for their use while they are in Australia. It is understood that the Duke of Connaught will be given York House, St. James's Palace, when it is vacated by the Duke of York.

THE Kaiser wears on the middle finger of his left hand a large ring—a square, dark-coloured stone set in massive gold. The story is that the ring is an heirloom in the Hohenzollern family, dating from the time when the ancestors of the Kaiser—the Margraves of Nuremberg—followed their leaders to the capture of the Holy Sepulchre from the Moslems. The Margrave of Ulrich, who lived in the thirteenth century, was an adventurous prince, and it is believed that the ring came into Ulrich's possession after a hard-fought battle under the walls of Jerusalem. It belonged to one of Saladin's successors, and in some unexplained manner it found its way on to the finger of the German knight.

THE German Emperor is an adept at tennis, having his private court, where he practises assiduously. At fending, too, he is no mean exponent, never letting a day pass without having a bout with the foils, while if he is not seen on the river, he at all events utilises a rowing-machine, which is fixed in his dressing-room. The Tsar of Russia is a cyclist quite above the average, and were it consistent with his dignity to appear on the track, would undoubtedly hold his own in good company. As a sprinter, too, his ability is not to be despised. The King of Greece is a fine swimmer, as is likewise King Oscar of Sweden. The King of the Belgians prides himself upon his walking powers, which, indeed, anyone whom he honours with his company soon perceives to his cost are above those of the ordinary pedestrian.

IN some respects Her Majesty's gardens at Osborne are the most luxuriant she has; but it is only on account of the wonderful manner in which trees and shrubs grow in the Isle of Wight and the rapidity with which they develop. Osborne was a well-wooded demesne when the Queen bought it, before the present house was built, and it took Prince Albert and the land-steward, Mr. Toward, five years to arrange and lay out the grounds to the best advantage, and they had about eight hundred acres to deal with, though the estate now comprises five thousand, much of which is devoted to farms and preserves. Great alterations have been made during the last year or so, as there was comparatively little fruit and vegetable garden. This department has not hitherto been much needed, as the products of Frogmore are forwarded daily when the Court is in residence; but the Queen looks beyond the present moment, and realises that whenever she is gathered to her fathers Osborne must be sufficient to support itself. The gardens at Balmoral have to be cultivated with due regard to climate, and the principal flower beds are cut in the smooth turf facing the base of Craig Gowan, and the grounds are not separated from the woods by hedges or ornamental shrubs. Ordinary bedding plants are not in favour, but quantities of bulbs and herbaceous subjects fill the beds. Tea-roses on their own roots flourish exceedingly, and in between them there are all sorts of annuals. The pretty white and yellow Scotch roses are set in borders edged with polyanthus. To judge by its abundance, cæcilia, or "snow in harvest," is a very favourite edging, and yellow and white arabis runs it close, while blue forget-me-nots and violets are used for the same purpose.

STATISTICS.

A HORSE eats nine times its weight in food in a year, a sheep six times.

THE barometer in England averages one fifth of an inch lower than in North Africa.

BRITISH factories use 55 million tons of coal a year. Forty millions are devoted to domestic use.

OUR national wealth is estimated at present at 11,800 millions. Of this 4,000 millions are invested abroad.

THE letter X only occurs once in a thousand letters in the English language. In French it occurs five times as often.

NO less than £40,000 in pennies is kept locked up at a time in London automatic penny-in-the-slot machines, according to the computation of the Mint officials.

GEMS.

IT is only the critic and the philosopher who can penetrate into all states of being, and realise their life from within.

THE art of putting men in the right places is the highest in the science of government, but that of finding places for the discontented the most difficult.

THESE are many seasons when to be still demands immeasurably higher strength than to act. Composure is often the highest result of power.

THE habit of blaming others when things go wrong is an insidious and dangerous one. Far more is it to the purpose to inquire within whether the fault, or much of it, may not lie at home.

HOUSEHOLD TREASURES.

EGG-FILLET.—Ingredients: One new-laid egg, four tablespoonsfuls of brandy or sherry, two teaspoonsfuls of castor sugar. Separate the yolk and white of the egg. Mix the yolk with the sugar, stirring it well and briskly for some minutes. Add the brandy. Beat the white of the egg till it is in a stiff froth, and mix this lightly with the yolk. Serve in a clean glass, or by spoonfuls, as it seems desirable.

HARICOT SOUP.—One pound small haricot beans, half-pound onions, one ounce of butter or dripping, three quarts of water, one pint of milk, salt and pepper, a little celery and parsley. Wash and soak the beans for twenty-four hours, put them on to boil with the water and dripping, add the onions—peeled and sliced—and a few stalks of celery cut small; boil for three or four hours, till all is quite soft; then rub through a coarse sieve, or if not convenient to do so, put the vegetables and haricots in a basin and mash them with the end of a rolling-pin; return the whole to the pan with the seasoning and milk, boil up again, and serve with fried or toasted bread cut into dice.

COLD MEAT PUDDING.—Quarter-pound flour, one egg, a little parsley, half-teaspoonful salt, some pepper, about half-pound cooked meat, one breakfastcup of milk, half-teaspoonful baking-powder; a finely-chopped shallot or young onion may be added if liked. Cut the meat up in thin slices—any scraps of cooked meat will do. Chop the parsley and onion. Put the flour in a basin, and the salt, pepper, and baking-powder, beat up the egg well, and pour the milk among it. Pour this very gradually among the flour, stirring all the time to prevent lumps. When quite smooth put in the meat, parsley, and onion and mix. Pour all in a greased pie-dish, and bake. It may then be turned out of the dish and have gravy poured round it.

MISCELLANEOUS.

MOST spiders are possessed of poison fangs, but very few are dangerous to human beings.

THE Abyssinian warriors always honour their King by a band of forty-five trumpets wherever he goes.

THE oldest house in England stands near St. Albans Abbey. It is octagonal in shape, and the walls of its lower story are of great thickness. It is 1,100 years old, and is still fit for habitation.

THE largest balloon ever constructed, capable of lifting over six tons, will ascend from Berlin to make meteorological observations. It will be supplied with provisions for several weeks and two beds.

THE Military Mounted Police is the only corps that has no privates, every member being of non-commissioned rank, so that the striking of "a red cap," as each member is called, is all the greater offence in the eyes of regimental men than were the attacked not a wearer of the chevrons.

ON the average, it is said, Spain enjoys about 3,000 hours of sunshine in a year, while Italy has 2,800. France has almost as much sunshine as Italy, her figures being 2,200. Germany has at her disposal no more than 1,700 hours; while England has to get along with 1,400—less than half of Spain's amount.

THE Russian mode of brewing tea is to make a strong essence by infusing a large quantity of tea in a small supply of water, and a little is put into a glass, which is then filled with hot or cold water, as desired. The true Russian never puts sugar into his cup. He often, however, bites a piece as he sips his tea.

OF monasteries and lamaseries in Pekin the number is endless. The lamas and boses who dwell therein can be counted by the thousands. They are mostly Tibetans and Mongolians, supposed to be studying Buddhism under the direction of an authenticated lineal descendant of Buddha himself. Indeed, in one particular monastery three lineal descendants are to be seen for a consideration. They are regarded as semi-gods and treated as such. Of the three so favoured, fed and flattered, one is a youngster of some twelve years, a bright, lively Mongolian boy, fully alive to his own importance, high dignity and destiny, yet not adverse to the filling of his baggy little pockets with the dollars of such "foreign devils" as afford him the opportunity of so doing. The lamas and boses are a greasy, grimy, dirt-inclined lot. The denser the dirt the greater the reputation for sanctity and close spiritual affinity with Buddha. Their whole time seems to be passed in eating, extracting dollars from strangers, and sleeping.

THE gathering of mistletoe is a relic of Druidic worship, and its pagan character has adhered to it to our times; for it is not admitted into church decoration. The mystic uses of the mistletoe have also been traced to the well-remembered golden branch of Virgil in *infernus*; and to the religious ceremonies of the Greeks and Romans. In the Scandinavian mythology, the mistletoe is dedicated to its Venus Frigga. "Garlothe, mistletoe, a magic shrub, appeared to be the forbidden tree in the middle of the trees of Eden, for in the Eids the mistletoe is said to be Balder's death, who yet perished through blindness and a young woman." The Druids doubtless dispensed the plant at a high price, for we are told that "as late as the seventeenth century peculiar efficacy was attached to it, and a piece hung round the neck was considered a safeguard against witches." There are about twenty kinds of trees in England to which the mistletoe will attach itself; and the best plan to propagate the plant is to crush a ripe berry on the under surface of a branch of the tree on which it is desired to grow it. In twelve months the article will have got firm hold, and then the green leaves will begin to show themselves.

NOTICES TO CORRESPONDENTS.

P. L.—Apply to prison authorities.

RALPH.—Yes, if you can prove your claim.

GEORGE.—Apply at Somerset House, Strand, London.

C. G.—We know of no such institution. Consult a clergymen.

REGULAR READER.—They ought to pay it over directly it is received.

COURT.—Powell's police are being recruited exclusively from Colonial forces.

BEAUTY.—Keep it in as damp and cool a place as you conveniently can.

G. C.—It depends entirely upon where they are kept, and how they are to be used.

JOYOUS.—Use your serviette if you require it, but not otherwise than you can help.

EDWARD.—The first gold that was coined in England was in the reign of Edward III.

OLD READER.—A person engaged on trial must work the month or forfeit his wages.

G. M.—The widow takes one-third and the children receive the other two-thirds among them equally.

ANXIOUS TO KNOW.—Your questions are such as should be submitted to a lawyer for careful consideration.

LEONORA.—To cleanse a sponge, let it lie all night immersed in sweet milk, and then rinse it thoroughly in cold water.

DOWTY.—The objection to changing one's name is that one might be troubled in proving one's identity in the case of a legacy.

MARY.—A domestic servant is required to take and give one month's notice, and is entitled to be paid at the end of that month.

DISTRESSED ONE.—Rest them as much as possible by changing your shoes several times a day—even from an old one to a new one is a rest.

RONNIE.—Systematic exercise taken in the morning before dressing puts one's muscles in good working order and lessens the tendency to fatigue.

R. B.—Groomsmen do not go to church with bridesmaids or stand near them during the ceremony; neither do they come down the church with them.

ONE WHO WANTS TO KNOW.—You present the inferior to the superior, the gentleman to the lady, the unmarried lady to the married lady, the commoner to the person of rank.

HILDA.—You should not apologise for the smallness of your house; apologies always seem vulgar; but you should certainly tell people about the arrangements you are going to make.

GACKE.—Cucumber is cut up very thin and placed in a dish; it is sometimes covered with vinegar, salt and pepper, and sometimes served plain. You would eat it with salmon or with cold meat.

MILLICENT.—Shred up the onions finely, sprinkle a little salt over them, throw them into fat boiling in the frying-pan; do not have too much fat in the pan, as that prevents them browning properly.

VARY ANXIOUS.—If the son cannot spare more towards the aged mother's support than three shillings weekly, the parochial authorities must provide what she needs beyond that to keep her going; but they may offer to take her into the house.

GWYN.—We do not think you can ever get things right again. Forget all about him. He will never be any good to you now—only an annoyance. Let him pay attention to anyone he likes; do not notice what he does—or perhaps we should say, do not appear to notice.

FELICIA.—Your mother should return the call within a week. That is the correct time in which to return a first call, and it is all the more imperative if the caller is of superior rank. Return the call within a week, whether the call has been paid in the morning or the afternoon.

A SUFFRAGAN.—Ascertain what produces the chronic headache, and shun the cause. Only simple remedies, which are known to be harmless, should be repeatedly applied. If the malady is of long standing and fails to yield to simple remedies, a physician should be consulted.

DOUG.—Olive oil, five ounces; spermaceti, half an ounce; yellow wax, half an ounce; melt all together in a gallipot on the hob; when cold, rub well into the hands, and put on a pair of old kid gloves, taking care to coat out the palms, as it is not healthy to sleep with that part of the hand covered.

MABEL.—Are you quite sure the wick is burned down far enough? It should be almost level with the holder through which it ascends from the oil—not the slit in the dome through which the flame comes; if wick is level with these it will flicker and smoke; another thing, there may be water in the oil.

VARY PUZZLED.—Yes, it is correct for the best man to give a present. Give something useful; find out what the young couple really want, and then let it be very nice of its kind. Silver is generally appreciated, so is any nice article of furniture, such as a handsome screen, and a good picture is a very welcome gift.

H. B.—Straw plenty of powdered borax where they generally come out at night, and force as much as you can of the same into holes and crevices where they retreat for the day. This, when persevered in, is said to be one of the best cures, but it requires patient persistency.

NINA.—A flat paint brush is a capital thing to use. It is much better for getting into corners than one's fingers, or than the piece of paper that many people use as a makeshift. The same brush can do duty for brushing eggs over pastry, and milk over newly-baked cakes to glaze them.

SWART MIGNON.—As you are not engaged to the young man, you cannot with reason object to his attentions to another lady. You may retort, however, by accepting the attentions of another young man. If this cause does not disturb him, you may be assured that his esteem for you is not a lover-like warmth.

CLARA.—See that it is well cleansed and nicely trimmed; break into small nice pieces, lay them in the dish they are to be served in, pour over the vegetable a nice cheese sauce, and thickly sprinkle with Parmesan cheese grated, and over that a good sprinkling of bread-crumbs, and bake till nicely browned in a hot oven.

A WOMAN'S ANSWER.

Do you know you have asked for the costliest thing
Ever made by the hand above—
A woman's heart and a woman's life,
And a woman's wonderful love?Do you know you have asked for this priceless thing
As a child might ask for a toy—
Demanding what others have died to win,
With the reckless dash of a boy?You have written my lesson of duty out,
Man-like you have questioned me;
Now stand at the bar of my woman's soul
Until I have questioned thee.You require your mutton should always be hot,
Your socks and your shirts be white;
I require your heart to be true as God's stars,
And as pure as heaven your soul.You require a cook for your mutton and beef;
I require a far greater thing;
A seamstress you're wanting for stockings and
shirts—

I look for a man and a king.

A king for a beautiful realm called Home,
A man that the Maker, God,
Shall look upon as He did the first,
And say, "It is very good."I am fair and young, but the rose will fade.
From my soft young cheek some day;
Will you love me then 'mid the falling leaves,
As you did 'mid the bloom of May?Is your heart an ocean so strong and deep,
I may launch my all on its tide?
A loving woman finds heaven or hell
On the day she is made a bride.I require all things that are grand and true,
All things that a man should be;
If you all this give, I will stake my life
To be all you demand of me.If you cannot be this, a laundress and cook
You can hire, with little to pay;
But a woman's heart and a woman's life
Are not to be won that way.

OLD READER.—Peel and slice two onions, and extract the juice by pounding and squeezing; add half an ounce of shredded white soap, two ounces of fuller's earth, and half a pint of vinegar; boil together, and when cool spread it over the scorched lines, and let it dry on; then wash out the lines.

GERTIE.—Stains caused by indelible ink on linens may, with patience, be made so faint as to be hardly perceptible. First of all moisten the stain with iodine, then use hyposulphite of soda. Next rinse in clear water and dry well, and the stain, if a new one, will often entirely disappear, and even an old one will grow very faint.

FLORINA.—To remove split ink first take up as much as possible with a spoon, and then pour some milk on the place. This will mix with the remaining ink, and must also be taken up with a spoon, and this must be repeated until the milk is hardly coloured with ink at all. Then wash the place with cold water, and wipe dry with a cloth.

R. H.—The rattlesnake, although its poison is so fatal, is, in fact, not a very dangerous animal, and people are seldom bitten by it. This arises from two causes; first, that it invariably gives you notice of its presence by its rattle; and secondly, that it always coils itself up like a watch-spring before it strikes, and then darts forward only about its own length.

CATHERINE.—We really cannot undertake to say "what is said to be unicolor," but we can safely assure you that no particular course of conduct is "unicolor," because there is no such thing as *lucus*. Do not let any such silly idea deter you and your lover from having your photographs taken or from presenting each other afterwards with your pictures.

H. V.—Pour boiling water into a bowl to heat it; pour it out again; put into the bowl three tablespoonsfuls of starch; mix it with hot water till like cream, then pour in enough boiling water to make it clear and the desired thickness; stir it with a composite candle till about half an inch of the candle is used, then add one dessertspoonful of turpentine and use it once.

TOMMY.—If a man is going to church with some ladies who have sittings in it, he would follow them up the aisle. If they have no fixed seats, he would ask them where they would like to go. It is not usual to acknowledge friends in church. If a man wished to speak to a lady after church, he would wait outside the church till she came, even if she had another friend with her.

A. P.—In airing a room there are two things to be remembered—First, that the impure air must be allowed to escape; and, secondly, that fresh air must be admitted. Impure air in a room is almost always warm, and will therefore rise towards the ceiling. When it will escape if the window be opened at the top, while cold fresh air will enter through the lower part of the window, if given a chance.

UNCOMFORTABLE.—There is nothing for you to do except to keep quiet and not to look self-conscious. Your friend is not bound to introduce a chance acquaintance to you when she meets them in the street unless you are staying on a visit with her. No offence is intended. You cannot break into the conversation unless an introduction is effected. All you can do is to look and feel unconcerned.

SALLIE.—Take equal parts of soft soap and water, and let this combination come to a boil; put the dry linen into this and leave it there for half an hour; then lift it out on a stick and without wringing it out and just as wet as possible spread it out in the glaring sunlight and sprinkle the stains freely with salt. As the linen dries, wet it again and again, but not sufficiently to wash off either the soap or the salt. Keep this up throughout the day, and the blackest stains can be eradicated.

WORRIED.—Regular exercise is one of the best means of getting rid of superfluous flesh—but to do any good it must be taken systematically every day—in the air if possible; if impossible, then in the house in the form of calisthenics. Do not knock yourself up by suddenly beginning to take tremendous walks if you are not in the habit of walking, but do things gradually, beginning, say, with a couple of miles, or even less, a day, and taking a longer distance as you get accustomed to the exercise. Perseverance pays in this as in most other things.

L. W.—To clean a waterproof cloak, dip the garment in cold, soft water; then, with a scrubbing brush and yellow soap, proceed to scrub it all over, having spread it out flat on a table. When the dirt is removed dip it in repeated waters to get rid of the suds, but do not wring it. Hang it up in the air, or in an airy room, far from the fire to drain and dry. Paint or grease spots may be removed with benzine or spirits of turpentine, but common soap will perform the rest, the dirtiest part requiring the most scrubbing. Avoid hot water or drying before a fire.

IANNE.—If you are, as you say, "fairly intelligent," you certainly have a far more valuable gift than if you were blessed with great beauty. If you are careful to cultivate and develop your intelligence (which may be a modest name for intellect), you will find yourself a far more valuable member of society and more really appreciated than a girl noted for mere prettiness could possibly be. We do not suggest, of course, that you should neglect to make the best of your personal appearance; to endeavour to look one's best is only to respect oneself, and if a girl is conscious that she presents a pleasing appearance, her manner will be easy and natural in society, and she will be able to use her gift of "intelligence" to its best advantage.

FRANCES.—The orthodox period of mourning for a widow is two years. All crepe for the first year, and a certain amount for nine months, then plain black for three. The period of seclusion is a year. A widow is not bound to pay visits during the first year of her bereavement, except to her relations, or people whom she knows exceedingly well. She need not go out to any parties or issue any invitations. Some people enter society to a certain extent at the expiration of six months; it is very much a matter of choice, of course. Women who have to earn their living cannot maintain as lengthy a seclusion as they would wish, and society people are not always willing to be away from the world so long. It is very much a matter of individual taste.

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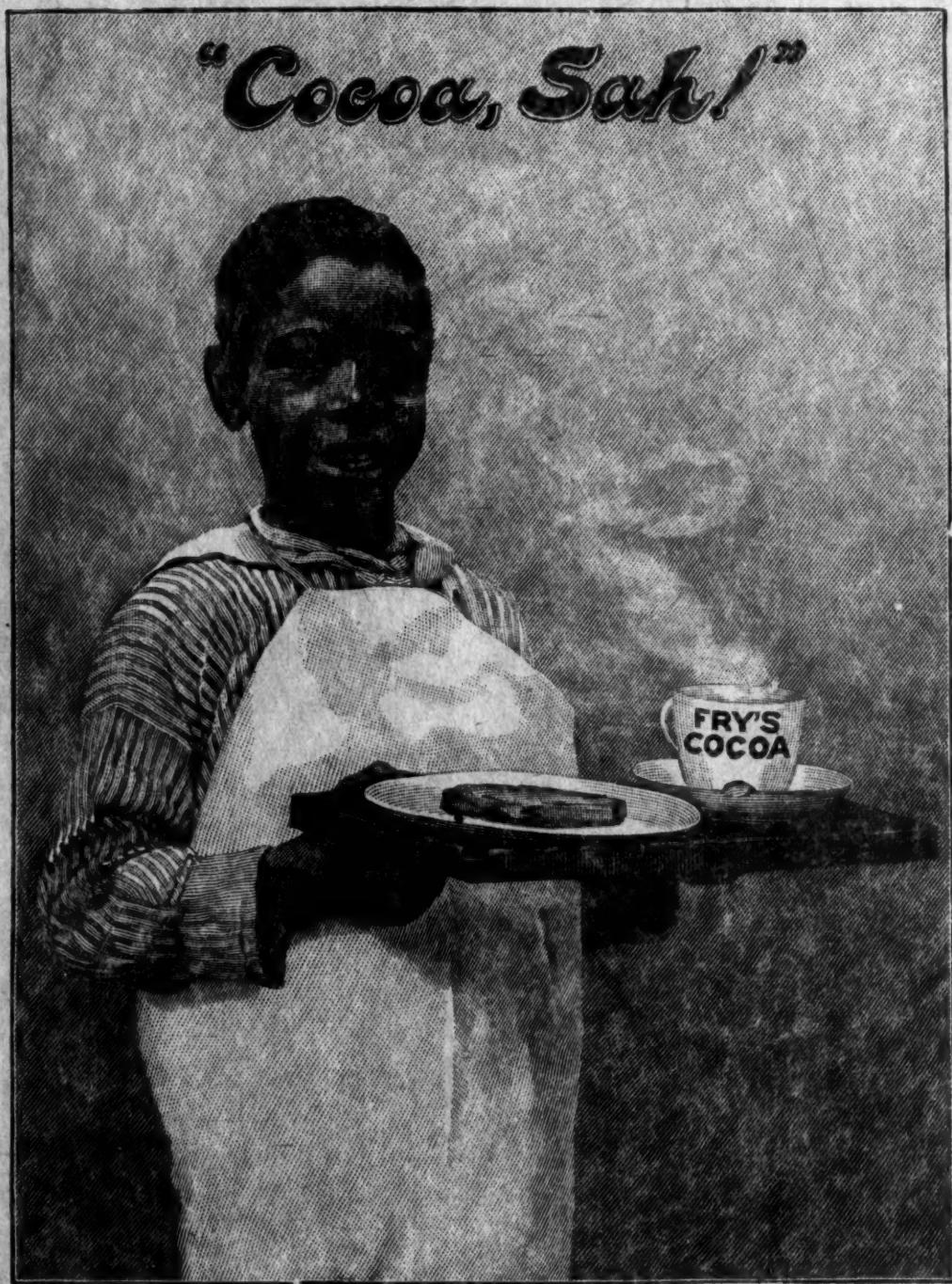
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